

**IMPACT OF INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE
ACTIVITIES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE
PROFICIENCY AMONG SELECTED STUDENTS
AT ALVAN IKOKU FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF
EDUCATION, OWERRI, IMO STATE.**

By

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Abstract

Intercultural language activities have become essential in modern language education, especially in multicultural contexts like Nigeria. Nowadays, intercultural competence in language education has become an essential skill alongside language proficiency. This study explored the impact of intercultural language activities on enhancing English language proficiency and intercultural competence among selected student-teachers from the Department of English Language Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri in Imo State of Nigeria. The study was done with real-life intercultural language learning activities through role-playing, simulations, and discussions among 180, 200-level student-teachers. They were selected through purposive sampling technique because they are expected to have acquired foundational English language skills and are ready to develop more advanced communicative and pedagogical abilities. They participated in the activities over a period of six weeks. Each session involved preparation, role-playing, and reflection. They took pre- and post-test to check their different levels of English proficiency and intercultural competence through observations, essays and questionnaires. At the end of the study, the total sum of all group pre-test score was 345 from 180 students, therefore, mean pre-test score was 38.33 % while the total sum of all group post-test score was 615 still from the 180 students, therefore, mean post-test score was 68.33 %. To get the improvement which is $= 615 - 345 = 270$. The mean improvement was 270 which is equivalent to 68.33 % - 38.33 % = 30 % improvement. This means that these

students showed significant improvement in language proficiency and intercultural competence. It was also found out that these activities encouraged engagement, critical thinking, and cultural understanding, which are essential at all levels of ELT. Suggestions and recommendations for further study are found at the end of the study.

Keywords: English proficiency, Intercultural language activities, Multicultural contexts, Intercultural competence, Language education.

Introduction

The English language plays a crucial role in academic and professional communication in Nigeria, making proficiency a crucial skill for students in higher education. However, many students in most tertiary institutions in Nigeria struggle to achieve the required level of proficiency in English. This issue is particularly, evident among second year (200 Level) students at Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, where challenges such as limited exposure to authentic language use, a lack of interactive learning opportunities, and insufficient focus on cultural aspects of language learning negatively, impact students' proficiency.

More so, this problem is compounded by the need for Nigerian students to compete in global academic and professional arenas where intercultural communication skills are increasingly valued. Therefore, it is imperative to explore innovative teaching strategies, such as intercultural language activities, that can promote

English language proficiency and equip students with the skills to navigate diverse cultural contexts during communication, effectively.

Sadly, one of the significant challenges in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigerian tertiary institutions, including Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, is the persistent low proficiency levels among students despite years of exposure to the language. These challenges arise due to several factors, including reliance on traditional, teacher-centred pedagogies that focus on rote memorisation of grammar rules, with minimal emphasis on active, meaningful communication and contextual language use.

Another critical aspect of the challenge is the lack of integration of intercultural dimensions into the language curriculum. In an increasingly globalised world, effective language learning requires more than linguistic competence. Linguistic competence demands the ability to understand and navigate cultural nuances. However, many language programmes in Nigeria do not prioritise intercultural competence, leaving students unprepared for real-world communication in diverse cultural settings. This gap in instruction, limits students' ability to engage with and appreciate the cultural aspects of the English language, further hindering their proficiency and confidence in using the language.

Moreover, the socio-cultural and economic background of many students poses an additional challenge. Many come from educational systems or communities with limited exposure to authentic English language usage,

making it difficult for them to develop both linguistic and intercultural competencies. These students often struggle to connect classroom learning with real-world applications, leading to low motivation and engagement in language learning activities. In this context, intercultural language activities such as role-plays, simulations, collaborative projects, and the use of authentic materials reflecting diverse cultural contexts present an innovative approach to addressing these challenges.

However, implementing such activities in the classroom requires careful planning, teacher training, and resources, all of which may be constrained by institutional limitations or lack of awareness about the benefits of these approaches. Therefore, this study aims to explore these challenges by investigating how the introduction of intercultural language activities can address the gaps in English language proficiency among second year student teachers at Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri. It seeks to identify both the potential and the obstacles of using such activities to enhance students' linguistic and intercultural skills, ultimately providing a pathway for improving English language instruction in the Nigerian higher education system.

Nigeria, located in West Africa, is the most populous country on the African continent, with over 200 million people. Nigeria is often described as a culturally diverse nation, comprising more than 250 ethnic groups and over 500 languages, with Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba being the three largest ethnic groups. English, adopted as the official language during colonial rule, serves as a

unifying medium of communication across the country's diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. This makes English a crucial tool for education, governance, business, and international relations in Nigeria.

The Nigerian education system is structured into three levels which are; primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Tertiary institution, like Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri plays a vital role in training future professionals, educators, and leaders. As a multilingual country, Nigeria faces unique challenges in English language teaching and learning. For many students, English is learned as a second language after their native tongue, which can create linguistic and cultural barriers to proficiency. In the Nigerian context, English proficiency is essential for academic success, as it is the primary language of instruction in schools and higher education. However, despite its importance, many students in Nigerian universities, especially those from non-urban areas, struggle with English due to inadequate foundational education, limited access to quality teaching resources, and lack of exposure to authentic language use.

Certainly, Nigeria's rich cultural diversity also presents both opportunities and challenges for language education. While this diversity fosters a dynamic learning environment, it can sometimes lead to language interference, where native languages influence English usage, resulting in unique varieties of English such as Nigerian English. These varieties, while legitimate, can create disparities between formal English standards and actual language use. In this multicultural and

multilingual context, intercultural language activities can play a transformative role in addressing the challenges of English language proficiency.

Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, located in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, is one of the premier teacher education institutions in the country. Established in 1963 as the Advanced Teachers Training College, the institution was renamed in 1973 in honour of Alvan Ikoku, an educationist, nationalist, and advocate for universal education in Nigeria. Also, last year, it was elevated to a university of education. The university is committed to producing highly qualified teachers and education professionals equipped to meet the nation's educational needs. As a specialised institution focusing on teacher education, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri offers programmes at the undergraduate levels. These programmes span various discipline, including arts, sciences, education, and social sciences, with a strong emphasis on pedagogical training.

As Language lecturers, we have garnered extensive experience in teaching and mentoring students across various levels of higher education. Our roles involve delivering comprehensive lectures, fostering linguistic competence, and inspiring critical thinking among students. In our capacity, we have taught a range of courses, including English grammar, phonetics and phonology, morphology and syntax, academic writing, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and literary studies, tailoring our teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of students. Beyond classroom teaching, we are actively

involved in research, focusing on critical issues such as improving English language proficiency among students, exploring the impact of intercultural language learning, and addressing educational challenges faced by children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our research contributions have not only enriched our teaching but also advanced the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigeria.

As mentors, we are deeply committed to guiding our students in their academic and professional journeys. We provide individualised support to help them overcome challenges, develop confidence in using English, and achieve their goals. Our mentorship extends to supervising research projects, where we encourage innovative approaches to addressing language and educational issues. Our work at Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri and FUTO reflects our passion for teaching, research, and mentorship, as well as our commitment to transforming the educational experiences of our students. This dedication underscores our roles as a leader in the advancement of English language education in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on these three theoretical frameworks:

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), as developed by Michael Byram (1997), is a critical framework for understanding how individuals interact across cultures. Byram's model identifies five core components: attitudes (e.g., openness and curiosity),

knowledge (of cultural practices and worldviews), interpretive skills, skills of discovery, and critical cultural awareness (p. 34). These components serve as a foundation for designing activities that simultaneously enhance language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity especially, as “Nigeria is a country with over 500 languages and numerous ethnic groups, making it one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse nations globally” (Adegbija, 2004, p. 12).

Richards and Rodgers (2001) emphasise the role of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in fostering real world language use. They argue that role-playing and simulations provide learners with practical opportunities to navigate diverse cultural contexts (p. 87). This approach complements ICC by emphasising meaningful communication, rather than rote memorisation of language structures. According to Mishan and Tamas (2024, p. 80),

... personal and cultural sensitivities of learners are paramount in engaging in intercultural (and admittedly any) learning activity. Because culture is such a sensitive area, it is particularly important when planning intercultural learning to build up learners’ trust and confidence in the process. As well as this, building intercultural awareness requires staging, in a similar way to building up language competence.

Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory highlights the importance of collaborative learning in diverse classrooms. His concept of the Zone of Proximal

Development (ZPD) suggests that peer interactions, particularly in multicultural settings, are crucial for constructing both linguistic and cultural knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Research Questions: The following research questions guided the study.

1. How does participation in intercultural language activities impact students' English language proficiency?
2. To what extent do intercultural language activities enhance students' intercultural communicative competence?
3. How do student teachers perceive their experiences in intercultural language activities, and how do these activities influence their understanding of diversity?

Methodology

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches, utilising data from 180 students placed in nine groups of 20 students in a group, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of how intercultural activities influence language skills.

Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design. It integrated quantitative data collection methods (pre- and post-tests) with qualitative data (interviews, questionnaires, and reflective journals). This combination provided a well-rounded understanding of the effects of intercultural language activities on students' language proficiency. The quantitative

approach focused on measurable changes in language proficiency while qualitative approach explored students' attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of the activities thus, the following intercultural language activities were designed for each group:

(a) Students share stories, folktales, or personal experiences from their cultural backgrounds, followed by group discussions to explore similarities and differences across cultures through WhatsApp platform with the researcher as the admin. The objective is to enhance speaking, listening, and comprehension skills and foster an appreciation for diverse cultural perspectives.

Example: A student from the Yoruba culture shares the story of Ijakadi (a tale of bravery), while another from the Igbo culture narrates the legend of Eze Nwaanyi (the queen). Afterward, students discuss the cultural values in these stories, such as courage, leadership, and morality, and reflect on their relevance in modern society.

(b) They engage in role-plays simulating real-life intercultural interactions, such as a business meeting, a social gathering, or a classroom setting. These were scheduled during their free periods. The objective is to develop conversational skills in English and practice appropriate language use in various social and professional contexts.

Example: Students simulate a scene where an American exchange student visits Nigeria for the first time and interacts with a local family. Roles are assigned to them. One student plays the host, another the visitor and others

serve as observers who analyse the language and cultural norms used in the interaction.

(c) They participated in debates on culturally significant topics, using English as the medium of communication. This was done on Wednesday's afternoon that is mapped out for social activities by my institution. The objective is to improve critical thinking and argumentative skills in English and expand vocabulary and ability to articulate opinions.

Example: "Cultural traditions should evolve to meet modern societal needs". Each group argued for or against the topic while incorporating examples from their cultural contexts.

(d) They write essays, reflective journals, or reports on intercultural themes. This was done as take-home assignment. The objective is to strengthen written communication skills and encourage critical reflection on cultural practices and their influence on communication.

Example: "Compare a traditional festival in your culture with one from another country, focusing on their linguistic and cultural expressions". Students analyse festivals like the Igbo New Yam Festival and the Naming ceremony in Niger Republic.

(e) Interactive games that require students to learn and use phrases or idioms from different cultures in English. This was done on Wednesday's afternoon that is mapped out by the institution for social activities. The objective is to build vocabulary and listening skills and increase

intercultural awareness in a fun and engaging way. Example: Game 1: Cultural Pictionary, here students draw items representing their culture (e.g., traditional attire, food, artefacts), while their peers guess and describe them in English.

Game 2: Idioms Across Cultures, here students explain the meaning of idioms from their culture in English (e.g., A bird at hand vs. an Igbo proverb like, the sun will shine again after the rain.).

(f) They watch films or documentaries showcasing different cultures, followed by structured discussions. This was posted into WhatsApp platform for each group. The objective is to enhance listening comprehension and critical thinking skills and promote cultural empathy and awareness.

Example: Screening a Nigerian film like *Akụ na Ukwá* and an American film like *Forrest Gump*. Students discuss themes like family dynamics, work ethics, and communication styles portrayed in the films.

(g) They work in groups to create projects that highlight cultural diversity, using English as the working language. This was done by their scheduled time according to their group decision. The objective is to develop teamwork, research, and presentation skills and encourage deeper exploration of cultural topics.

Example: Group project, here create a multimedia presentation comparing marriage customs in different cultures (e.g., Nupe, Efik, Tiv, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, and Indian cultures). The presentation includes descriptions,

visuals, and discussions of cultural expressions in English.

Population: This consisted of second year as Alvan Ikoku Federal University is a federal institution; students come from diverse cultural backgrounds and possess varying levels of English proficiency. They are 310 in number.

Sample Size: A sample size of 180 students was selected based on the availability and consent of students from the Department of English Language and Literature who fitted the inclusion criteria. Only second year students who were enrolled during the academic session of the study and have consented to participate were selected

Sampling Method: A stratified random sampling method was used to select the sample.

Instruments for Data Collection

(a) The pre-test and post-test to assess students' proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and, writing. The tests consisted of multiple-choice questions, short answer questions, and essay type prompts. A comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores will help determine the overall improvement in students' proficiency after participating in the intervention.

(b) Observation checklist to observe student engagement and participation during intercultural activities.

(c) Semi-structured interviews

(d) Students were encouraged to maintain reflective journals, documenting their personal experiences and observations.

(e) Questionnaire

Data Collection Period

The data collection period was 6 weeks both in and out of class.

Week 1: The pre-test was administered via take-home assignment at the beginning to assess the students' baseline English language proficiency.

Weeks 2-5: Students were instructed to keep reflective journals outside of class. The journals tracked their personal experiences and insights as they engage with intercultural language activities. They were asked to write in their journals weekly and submit them for review at the end of each week. Students were also asked to complete additional out of class activities, like reading assignments or practice tasks related to the intercultural activities they participated in during the week. In addition to out-of-class data collection, the researcher observed students' participation and interaction during the intercultural activities in class. Observation checklists were used to track students' engagement and language use during these activities.

Week 6: The post-test, similar to the pre-test, was administered. This test was used to assess improvements in students' English language proficiency.

At the conclusion of the study, students completed questionnaires as take-home assignment that assessed their perceptions of the intervention and its impact on their language proficiency.

Analysis: The analysis of the data collected for this study involved the calculation of the mean for various data points, especially for the pre-test and post-test scores to assess the change in students' language proficiency.

Table 1: Pre-Test Scores

S/N	Number of students	Mean Score	Sum Score= No of Students x Mean score
1	20	35	700
2	20	40	800
3	20	30	600
4	20	45	900
5	20	45	900
6	20	35	700
7	20	40	800
8	20	45	900
9	20	30	600
Total	180 students	345	6900

Simply multiply each group's average (sum score) by number of students:

Therefore, Mean: $6900/180=38.33$

Total sum of all group pre-test scores = 345

Total number of students (in this case, 180 students).

Therefore, mean pre-test score = 38.33

The pre-test table above shows the students' baseline English language proficiency level at the beginning of the study.

Table 2:Post-Test Scores

S/N	Number of students	Mean Score	Sum Score=No of Students Mean score
1.	20	70	1400
2.	20	80	1600
3.	20	65	1300
4.	20	75	1500
5.	20	65	1300
6.	20	55	1100
7.	20	60	1200
8.	20	75	1500
9.	20	70	1400

Total	180 students	615	12,300
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Therefore, Mean: $12,300/180$

Therefore, mean post-test score = 68.33

The post-test table above shows the students' English language proficiency level at the end of the study.

Table 3: The difference between the pre-test and post-test scores for each group of 20 students to measure the improvement in language proficiency.

S/N	Number of students	Pre-test	Post-test	Differences
1	20	35	70	35
2	20	40	80	40
3	20	30	65	35
4	20	45	75	30
5	20	45	65	20
6	20	35	55	20
7	20	40	60	20
8	20	45	75	30
9	20	30	70	40
Total	180	345	615	270

Improvement = post-test - pre-test

The improvement is = $615 - 345 = 270$

Mean improvement = 270

Table 3 shows significant improvements from the differences of the pre-test and the post-test.

Findings

The results above suggest that integrating cultural awareness into language learning can improve students' proficiency in English and their ability to communicate effectively in diverse settings. Therefore, the findings suggest that intercultural language activities have a significant positive effect on enhancing students' English language proficiency, as evidenced by the improvement in the pre-test and post-test scores. The data analysis revealed that students' proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing improved after participating in these activities.

Conclusion

Intercultural language activities significantly enhanced both English proficiency and intercultural competence among the participants. This approach encouraged critical thinking, collaborative learning, and real-world application of skills. However, limitations included the short duration of the study and reliance on self-reported data in reflection essays. Additionally, qualitative data from students' reflective journals, interviews, and questionnaires supported the conclusion that intercultural activities not only contributed to language skills development but also increased students' motivation to learn English. The exposure to different cultural

perspectives helped students appreciate the global relevance of the English language and provided practical learning experiences that made English more engaging and applicable in real-world contexts. The study further highlighted the importance of integrating intercultural elements into English language instruction in Nigeria, where English is widely used as a second language. Given the diversity of cultures in the country and the global role of English, incorporating intercultural activities into language education can foster more holistic and effective language learning.

Recommendations: Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made.

- It is recommended that educational institutions, particularly those offering language courses, integrate intercultural language activities into their curricula. These activities can include discussions on cultural topics, role-playing, cultural exchange programmes, and projects that involve students in exploring various cultural aspects. By exposing students to different cultural contexts, they can improve their English language skills while also developing greater cultural awareness and communication competence.
- Teachers should receive professional development and training on intercultural competence to better understand how to implement intercultural activities effectively in language teaching. Training programmes can help educators create more engaging and diverse learning experiences, understand students' cultural backgrounds, and tailor their teaching strategies to meet the needs of a

diverse student population. This can further enhance the impact of intercultural language activities on student learning outcomes.

- Educational institutions should leverage technology to provide students with opportunities for virtual cultural exchanges and communication with native English speakers or students from different countries. Online platforms and virtual exchange programmes can broaden students' exposure to various cultures and help them practice their language skills in diverse settings. This can be particularly valuable for students who may not have the opportunity to travel abroad but still want to experience intercultural communication.
- Universities should encourage collaborative projects that involve students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Group discussions, presentations, and collaborative writing assignments that focus on intercultural topics can enhance students' language proficiency while promoting mutual understanding and respect for cultural diversity. This will help create a more inclusive and interactive learning environment.
- Further research should be conducted to explore the long-term effects of intercultural language activities on students' language proficiency and intercultural competence. Studies could examine how these activities impact language learners at different academic levels, including high school and postgraduate levels. Additionally, research could explore the impact of intercultural activities on different language skills, such

as writing fluency, listening comprehension, or pronunciation.

- It is recommended that national education policies advocate for the inclusion of intercultural competence as part of the English language curriculum. Policymakers should recognize the importance of intercultural understanding in a globalized world and promote its integration into English language teaching programs across Nigeria. This approach would provide students with a more comprehensive education and prepare them for success in a multilingual and multicultural world.

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