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Connecting North and South: Engaging Latin American English Learners, Kenyan Intercultural Communications and American Undergraduate Students through Reciprocal Service Learning

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Abstract
Reciprocal Service Learning through videoconferencing is an efficient tool for connecting native English speakers of various world Englishes and ELs in other nations for the benefit of all. The authors of this study recognize the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning and the social justice of equalizing power structures through the inclusion of participants and researchers from both North and South as members of a project and research team. Through participant observation and document review the authors examine the experiences of educators and learners in the phenomenon of reciprocal service learning through videoconferencing focused on cultural competence and English language communication.

Keywords: Videoconferencing, English as a Foreign Language, reciprocal service learning, intercultural communication

Introduction
This study examines a decade-long project employing videoconferencing to connect students across international spaces. The goals examined were enhancing English language learning through EL-native English speaker interactions and developing cross-cultural competencies through intercultural exchanges.

The project was originally designed to globalize education in multicultural courses, and to offer direct international experiences through an affordable alternative to study. These courses had previously included local service learning experiences. Combining service learning with international videoconferencing was a logical evolution. However, international service learning has a history within a neocolonialist model (Hammersley, 2012). One of our project goals is to create a reciprocal service learning model through which benefits, contributions and power can be equalized for all partners (Hammersley, 2012; Rehbein, 2010). Recently added to the project, reciprocal service learning and research partnership help create more power-balanced North-South participation and control within the project.

Background and Theoretical Framework
International videoconferencing is an engaging, cost-effective interactive tool. It allows participants to collaborate face-to-face, in real time, and share all types of information through multiple senses (Burke, Chaney & Kirsten, 2010; Battaglino, 1993). It has been successfully employed for enhancing education (Payne, Gooday, Coutts, Duncan, & Wolfe, 2006); synchronous communication increases motivation
Language, thought, and culture are integral to communication (Valdes, 2005). Immersion is ideal for cross-cultural communication learning as well as second language learning; however, this is often not possible due to financial and time constraints. International videoconferencing, though neither linguistic nor cultural immersion, offers direct and authentic communication experiences where immersion experiences are limited or not available. Authentic interactions through international videoconferences can unpack the stereotypes participants hold about other cultures and promote cross-cultural understanding critical to successful education. Gillies (2008) found that there is “extensive research evidence which points to the benefits of mutual understanding, broadened awareness, tolerance, and new insights, afforded by videoconference interaction of this kind” (p. 108).

Lee (2010) found that videoconferencing facilitates language learning as well as intercultural communications. There have been EL-native English speaker exchanges via videoconferencing since the early 2000’s. Although these interactions have helped improve communication skills, they did not include reciprocity. Yu-Chih (2009) found that students experienced helpful practice with native English speakers during videoconferences; but were challenged by topic shifts and turn taking. Reciprocity in our project involved reciprocal teaching and learning of cultural information including culturally-based communication and modeling English for ELs.

Our research is grounded in four theories: Interactionist Theory (IT), Constructivism (C), Media Richness Theory (MRT), and Critical Theory (CT). Participants had opportunities to learn about each other's language and/or worlds through mediated, real-time, synchronous online dialogue that enriched learning experiences in ways that traditional pedagogy could not. This was a unique experience for most participants allowing them to reflect and reconsider how they viewed others, as well as how others viewed them. Although students are online for both social and other educational – research activities, these North-South connections uniquely provided rich learning environments that textual and other audiovisual content would not have accorded due to the dialogic, cognitively-engaging, multisensory nature of the discussions and platform used.

Vygotsky (1986) views language learning as the learning of discourse, as well as syntactic structures. Productive discourse includes authentic use of appropriate semantics and pragmatics best acquired through interactions with native speakers. While other theories place the learning of structures as the primary source of second language (L2) acquisition, Interactionist Theory of Language Acquisition puts authentic and meaningful social interaction discourse as primary (Ellis, 1985); with learners constructing the new language through socially mediated interaction (Vygotsky, 1986). Social interaction between native English speakers and ELs in a global context through international videoconferencing is supported by this theory.

Media richness theory contends that different media offer different levels of information transfer in both quantitative and qualitative terms. It confirms the
efficacy of using multiple senses in online communication (Montrieux, Vanderlinde, Schellens, & De Marez, 2015); particularly the ability to clarify information and enhance meaning-making (El-Shinnawy & Markus, 1992). Fetterman (1996) found that electronic communication is more effective when participants hear “nuances of tone and nonverbal ‘language’” (p. 23). Media richness is important for both native speakers communicating with one another and ELs seeking to improve communication skills.

Critical Theory demands that we examine power relationships between Global North and South participants and make adjustments to equalize power. Understanding and removing the culture of silence through knowledge and action is central to equalizing power structures. Reciprocal service learning through North-South partnerships can be a mechanism for the examination of power relationships and to inform partners how to address inequality (Hammersley 2012). Clayton and Kniffin (2017) describe their service learning programs as valuing “everyone involved as co-educators, co-learners, and co-generators of knowledge and practice”. International service learning programs for students from the North often claim to be beneficial to both students and the targeted recipients. They claim to offer reciprocal, co-created programs and to have equalized power relationships between North and South partners. Hammersley (2012) found this not to be the case; as patterns of colonial era power structures were embedded in these “partnerships”. Such programs have been critiqued as, despite good intentions, doing more harm than good (Illich, 1968). A Critical Theoretical approach demands genuine reciprocity with agendas set by all participants and equalization of voice.

Critical theorist Henry Giroux’s concept of voice “refers to the multifaceted and interlocking set of meanings through which students and teachers actively engage in dialogue with one another” (McLaren, 2007, p. 243). International videoconferencing can facilitate this balance through equal voice; promoting dialogue, and engaging students and educators from both the Global North and South. Like the Global South Project, our Critical Theoretical goal of is to move away from a model that is exclusively Euro-American in perspective to a more balanced view (Rehbein, 2010).

Constructivist Theory frames learning as a process through which learners co-construct new knowledge and meaning individually or socially through real-world interactions. Videoconferencing is increasingly being used in communication and as such can be referred to as a constructivist tool offering a wider spectrum of interactions than a single educational institution can offer (Dede, 1994, p. 35). Berman and Tinker (1997) observed that through videoconferencing “students can take learning far beyond textbooks into the real world of open-ended problems and unanswered questions” (p. 53). Montrieux et. al. (2015), reported that innovative teachers found that learning through electronic devices could integrate student’s daily lives into learning and transform the learning process and promote meaningful learning. Bruder (1993) found that educators recognized constructivist elements in networked environments involving real world problem solving activities. Jonassen (1994) described principles that can be used to translate constructivist theory into practice.
Method

Through participant observation and document review (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Spradley, 2016), the authors examined the experiences of participants as learners and instructors in reciprocal service learning through videoconferencing. Each researcher participated in guided reflections and recorded field note narratives over the course of the project. Exchanges were recorded and research team members reviewed recordings and wrote narrative observations. Student participants wrote reflections on their exchange experiences which were reviewed by two members of the research team. All sources were coded for emergent categories (Patton, 1990).

Participants

Participants for this case study were selected through opportunistic sampling (Patton, 1990). Some participants self-selected and in others were invited by the researchers. Participants included Salvadoran students from an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program at a private secondary school and university level EFL program, American undergraduates studying modern languages, international development and applied linguistics and Kenyan undergraduate communication students studying intercultural communication. Three instructor/researchers, two Kenyan students, 10 American students and 32 Salvadoran students participated in the videoconferences.

The researchers participated in the exchanges in various roles including facilitator, technology manager and trouble shooter, organizer, exchange participant and as linguistic and cultural bridges. The role of the instructor was not to control interactions, but to facilitate a more constructivist, student-centered approach. Some participants participated in multiple exchanges (Kenyan and American students) while others participated once or twice (Salvadoran students).

Findings and Discussion

Data from participant observations of videoconferences, reflections and field notes of three instructor-researchers, and report and reflection documents from Kenyan and American students were reviewed and analyzed for emergent categories. Salvadoran student reflections were recorded and reported by their instructor. Emergent categories identified were emotional reactions, technological challenges, other challenges, topic negotiation, cultural differences and similarities, language learning, cross-cultural communication skills and cultural/linguistic bridging, videoconferencing as a tool for authentic linguistic/cultural “immersion”, power relationships and constructivism in videoconferencing.

Emotional reactions

All participants were enthusiastic about the exchanges; they had fun, wanted to continue with exchanges and opportunities to learn about each other’s cultures and
recommended this interactive format be included in other courses. All students experienced anxiety prior to their first exchange. American students feared that they would not answer questions to the expectations of their exchange partners. Salvadorans felt their English competency would not be adequate to communicate. Kenyan and American student anxiety was also attributed to lack of previous experience in direct communications with people from other countries.

Technology Challenges
Technology experiences varied for all participants. Some found WebEx easy while others required training. Furthermore, some had difficulty using WebEx on their Mobile devices. As the participants became more accustomed to the platform and equipment the challenges dissipated.

Limited Internet connectivity was an issue in all participating locations. When working with a variety of Internet providers the connectivity became a big challenge. Several American and Kenyan participants were unable to log on to the platform due to low connectivity or device compatibility issues. Some potential participants were unable to commit to the project due to internet connectivity issues and in other cases due to scheduling. Kenyan student observed,

... I thought getting online would go swiftly for me, it did not go that way. Firstly I had a problem with my Wi-Fi connection... and sound ... and I was furious.

Patience was needed due to interruptions caused by technology. Connectivity delays caused a wait time that was filled by using the text tool provided in WebEx. Power outages in Kenya occurred several times forcing participants to switch to alternative phone applications to continue participating.

Other Challenges
Additional challenges to this project were time differences, schedules, synchronization, and cultural-linguistic facilitation of sessions. Some potential participants were unable to commit to the project due to scheduled and work conflicts. Trial runs did not conclude as planned and may have caused initial set up delays. Time zone is a confirmed strong barrier to video conferencing (Lee, 2017).

Topic Negotiation
Topics were selected by all participants. The topic selection process differed between participants. Kenyans and American students were assigned readings from which they drew topics. Topics of personal interest were also included. Topic selection for videoconferences with El Salvador were set by the instructor as part of his lesson plan in one case and otherwise chosen by participants from personal interests. Topic negotiation occurred both before and during exchanges and was sometimes spontaneous.

Cultural Differences and Similarities
During the interactions, communicative differences manifested, particularly in the use of English language varieties. Kenyan, American and Salvadoran students learned about cultural differences and similarities within the topics of discussion. These topics included festivities, daily life, salaries/jobs, racism, traffic, college life and gender issues. The participants jointly constructed knowledge that would not have been available except through the direct interactions of videoconferencing. For example, through the discourse, American students realized that crime was bad in their city, but they did not live with the fear of being murdered as did students in El Salvador. Salvadoran students learned that American students did not feel the same apprehension when riding public transportation as they did. A Kenyan student stated that the American students dress more casually than expected.

Language Learning and Cross-cultural Communication Skills

Social interactions made available through the videoconferencing format provided authentic discourse opportunities that Interactionist Theory considers to be the primary means through which language learners acquire their language (English in this case). We believe that Interactionist Theory applies to our project in two instances: (1) the improvement of second language acquisition and (2) an expansion of the theory to include learning about different world Englishes (dialects). ELs in El Salvador improved both communications skills and their confidence in speaking with native English speakers. EL students learned that they can communicate with English speakers in situations outside of structured classroom settings. Improvements including phonological competence occurred through authentic and meaningful discourse; supporting the predictions of Interactionist Theory. American students found that they could easily understand Salvadoran students with repeated exposure; despite their expectation of having communication difficulties. They also formed bonds and trust that improved their communication. Further, both American students and Salvadoran students learned about differences between Spanish and English through the exchanges. The Salvadoran EFL instructor reported that:

One of the main benefits is that students have the opportunity for authentic real-life conversations and get more confidence to talk to native speakers... The Salvadoran instructor reflected that,

beginner students...were surprised that the participants (native speakers) understood what they said. ...my students improve[d] speaking skills as we always integrate pronunciation practices of sounds that are not present in Spanish.

Kenyan and American students speak English, however, they increase language and communication skills through exchanges with students who speak different dialects. Kenyans found Alabaman English slightly difficult to understand perhaps due to pronunciation or delivery speed. They were unaware of accents and dialects of English prior to the exchanges. The videoconferencing with speakers of other Englishes provided insights and authentic experience listening and learning to understand dialects different from their own.
Discourse rules differed between American and Kenyan cultures. Knowing when to talk and how long was a challenge and there were times when multiple participants would talk simultaneously. Turn-taking during the exchanges needed moderator guidance. This experience was transformative for all participants because it was reciprocal. It allowed participants to experience the use of vocal and facial cues via technology in person (MRT), rather than if they were just reading about one another.

**Videoconferencing as a tool for authentic linguistic/cultural “immersion”**

Participants in the exchanges took away combined experiences and new knowledge of both language and culture. Cultural and linguistic bridging facilitated productive interactions that improved communication skills and knowledge.

Cultural and linguistic barriers are a challenge during videoconference exchanges (Valdes, 1986). As such our project incorporated moderators to bridge cultural or linguistic barriers. Our moderators were familiar with U. S. cultures and those in Kenya and El Salvador. The Kenyan moderator had lived in the U. S. Although the Salvadoran and American moderators did not live in the others’ cultures both had EFL experiences that prepared them to act as bridges alerting participates to terms, behaviors, and other factors that could cause miscommunication. Consequently any verbal and non-verbal cues that would have typically created miscommunication seemed to create minimal problems.

**Power relationships**

Neocolonialism persists in Kenya as it does in much of the Global South. Kenyan curriculum continues to be Eurocentric. The United States continues to exert neo-colonialist power over its territories and the Global South including Latin American countries. Within this reality power relations in our study are moving towards equal power sharing. Conversations demonstrate equal power sharing especially when students started asking their own questions on both sides and sharing their own stories. As in the Global South Project, the reciprocal exchange of information and ideas moves us away from an exclusively Eurocentric perspective (Rehbein, 2010). We revised the project design with the goal of everyone having a voice. Kenyan students observed that cultural bridging served as a tool for equalizing voice. Cultural bridging mediates “meanings through which students and teachers actively engage in dialogue with one another” (McLaren, 2007, p. 263). Reciprocity in our model of service learning through videoconferencing has also been a conduit for equalizing power relationships. Participants in both countries give and gain information and skills.

Other aspects of power equalization include data sharing. Like Hammersley (2012) we observed that since the project originates at and is controlled by a university in the Global North this limits power sharing. Projects such as our make clear that power sharing and empowerment remain at the level of the individual participants since structures change very slowly.
The digital divide between lower income and higher income differentiates opportunities to participate fully. If the system or platform being used is purchased, then quality audio and video may only possible when the videoconference is held with participants who can afford the technology or platform. This means that videoconferences with low-income participants make it necessary to revert to “free” technology which often means low quality audio and video.

**Constructivism in Videoconferencing**

Johansen’s principles for transferring constructivist theory into practice help demonstrate constructivist principles in the project. The project *provided multiple representations of reality*: Initially students introduced themselves briefly before the discussion and there was an occasion when two students shared their log of their typical days.

The project *represented the natural complexity of the real world regarding language complexity, technology complexity and the uncovering of common misconceptions.*

Kenyan students stated that:

...I did experience minor difficulties in some words that the Alabama student pronounced, perhaps due to accent or speaking too fast. She had no problem repeating the sentence for me and soon enough we were back on the road. (*Language Complexity*)

A Kenyan student reflected:

Although I thought getting online would go swiftly for me, it did not go that way. Firstly I had a problem with my Wi-Fi connection...Wi-Fi and the sound icon was not working... and I was furious) Despite wait time students were able to start communicating via the text app on WebEx. (*Technology complexity*)

Finally, a Kenyan student remarked: “I expected people to be dressed officially (or at least not in pajamas.” (*Uncovering Common Misconceptions*)

The project *focused on knowledge construction rather than reproduction.* Each group constructed questions for their exchange partners for reciprocal learning. This helped students construct their own knowledge and reproduce it in their reflections. Not having the questions ahead of time allowed for spontaneous, anecdotal sharing. A Kenyan student reported,

We laughed, told stories and got to know each other’s cultures, both differences and similarities. We all had our chance to talk and interacted very well...

The project *presented an authentic cultural task, contextualizing rather than abstracting instruction for all participants.*

Kenyan students were assigned to investigate similarities and differences between Southern American culture and their own for their intercultural communication course. Salvadoran students were assigned to do projects involving individual travel goals and to seek knowledge in which they had an authentic
interest. American students selected topics of personal interest with a focus on course content.

The project provided real-world, case-based learning environments, rather than predetermined instructional sequences.

Students were exposed to a form of learning many had never experienced. Beyond the video conference itself students created their own learning criteria as a group. Students selected topics, themes, content areas and generated relevant questions.

The project fostered reflective practice.

The entire experience helped students think deeply about their lives and themselves in terms of educational and cultural contexts.

The project enabled context- and content-dependent knowledge construction. Students used their own real life experiences to construct their new reality. Their experiences were valid enough to share and to help exchange partner build better understanding of the other cultures. Each group became cultural experts in content creating, generating, and sharing for better understanding while sharing and constructing reality.

The project supported collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation.

The moderators facilitated social interaction and negotiation and everyone was able to accurately share and construct knowledge about each other’s culture.

Conclusions

This study examined the experiences of students and instructors with international videoconferencing reciprocal service learning to connect native English speakers, speakers of various world Englishes and ELs in other nations and enhance English learning and cross-cultural understanding. The project connected students and researchers from the North and South who might otherwise have never collaborated due to distance, cultural differences and financial constraints. We found that cross-cultural understanding and English language learning were enhanced though technology challenges and power relationships influenced the experience positively and negatively.

Interactions with native speakers improves English Learner (EL) oral communication skills and confidence (Lee, 2010). ELs did not have prior opportunities to interact with native speakers except through videoconferencing. Both intermediate and advanced ELs improved pronunciation; more advanced ELs increased vocabulary. All ELs increased their confidence in using English for oral communication. These language skills will serve them in academics and employment. Similarly, undergraduate students were unlikely to travel and have direct, authentic discourse with students from other nations. Thus, international
videoconferencing provided them these opportunities. For many participants, this was the first time to talk to someone from another country and dispel myths about life in other nations. Authentic information shared among all participants changed how they perceived each other. We strongly recommend videoconferencing as part of cross-cultural, ESOL teaching and language learning classes, particularly when students cannot travel to other parts of the country or the world.

Although ICTs provided a new learning platform for all, it has been and remains a challenge for videoconferencing. Internet connections, affordability of data, time and scheduling differences, and hardware were barriers to the smooth functioning of the interactions. Due to this, the team decided to write a grant that would help alleviate these barriers. As to the process itself, some students were able to conduct reciprocal service-learning videoconferences without supervision; while others needed one of the research team to direct (moderate) the flow of the conversations. Moderators acted as cultural and linguistic bridges and facilitated smoother exchanges and more equal participation. The reciprocal service learning model helped balance benefits for all participants.

The equalization of North/South partnerships demonstrates our commitment to a Critical Theoretical approach. Despite this commitment, we recognize that existing power structures that are linked to access to ICTs, educational systems, and cultural stereotypes continue to impede our efforts. We continue to seek a path toward equity.

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**Laureen Fregeau** earned her Ph.D. in Educational Theory and Policy from Penn State University. She teaches multicultural education, ESOL graduate courses, world languages and applied linguistics at the University of South Alabama. She holds an MA in Applied Linguistics in ESOL/Bilingual Education and taught secondary and adult ESL and ESOL teacher preparation and has various publications in the field of ESOL.

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**William Cornejo** earned his Licenciatura in ELT from the University of El Salvador. His thesis was on integrating videos and interactive presentations to promote critical thinking. He has taught English to children through adults at a bilingual school in El Salvador and currently coordinates a national program for the Salvadoran Ministry of Education to improve English teaching in public schools throughout El Salvador.