
Fil–Thai Language exchange Program Experience: Exploring the Next Step Forward

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Abstract: *The study sought to explore how to best continue the language exchange program of St. Paul University Manila (Philippines) and Silpakorn University (Thailand) by looking into the learning experiences of the participants coming from both universities. Through the use of mixed open-ended and closed-ended items in Google Form, the students were asked to answer questions that relate to their specific learning experiences throughout the 10-session program after their program was completed. The thematic analysis of narratives from 24 participants revealed that a deepening of cultural learning was achieved in the participants as conversations moved from surface-level topics to personal ones. The building of friendships between conversation partners allowed them to talk about more sensitive topics in succeeding sessions and achieve the goals of the collaborative activity at the end of the program (a video-documented talent exhibition).*

Keywords: *Cultural Exchange, Language Exchange, Online Learning, Learning Experiences*

I. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations declared the acceleration of the establishment of the Southeast Asian community in 2015. By doing so, it showed support for "an integrated, stable, knowledgeable and caring community... (through its three pillars, namely) the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)" (Keng, 2009, p. 2). In short, 2015 meant community-building for the ASEAN founded on "prosperity, people, and peace" (Letchumanan, 2015, para. 7). While the region's development as a community prioritized the "free flow of trade, seamless travel between countries, and a sense of connectedness among peoples" (Ng, n.d., para. 5), the COVID-19 pandemic that happened in 2020 posed problems towards their accomplishment. As a cultural community, the ASEAN has a lot to be concerned about the closure of schools during the pandemic.

Education during the Pandemic

The education sector was badly hit around the world because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Suzanne Goldberg, Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education, declared "the many ways that COVID-19, with all of its tragic impacts on individuals, families, and communities, (and) appears to be deepening divides in educational opportunity across... classrooms and campuses" (Office for Civil Rights, 2021, p. 3). UNESCO reported that two-thirds of the poorest countries in the world cut their education budgets during the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021). Meanwhile, Save the Children (2021) wrote that because of COVID-19 that the youths of the world's poorest countries lost more time in school compared to their peers in rich countries. The ASEAN only has two out of the 10-member nations considered as developed countries (Malaysia and Singapore); the rest are developing countries, with the Philippines and Indonesia having 90 percent of the region's poorest (Chisholm, 2017). The Philippines closed its schools during the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021) and

only students who can afford mobile phones, at the very least, were able to access online educational delivery. Gutierrez and Bilefsky (2021) wrote that "education experts have expressed concerns that the pandemic has created a "lost generation" of students, buffeted by the limits of remote learning and by overstretched parents struggling to serve as surrogate physics and literature teachers" (para. 10).

International Education during the Pandemic

With countries deciding to close their borders, Kacperczyk and Chromy (2020) presented the possibility that COVID-19 might "kill off" the internationalization of universities. Martin-Barbero and Marmolejo (2021) added that "over the past several months, the enthusiasm for living and studying abroad has waned significantly... (given) major travel restrictions, the ongoing global vaccination exercise, and prolonged visa delays for many of the six million international university student population globally" (para.1). Student priorities, daily support, and university destinations have also changed as a result, they added. Given the emergent mental health challenges in learners during the pandemic (Active Minds, 2020) and the inherent challenges of international education (Byrne, Brugha, & McGarvey, 2020), the psychological odds are against international education during the pandemic.

International Language Education during the Pandemic

Despite these challenges, Kokhanovskaya, Smychkova, and Chai (2021) found that contemporary electronic distance learning (EDL), which compensated for the closure of schools, while inaccessible for poor students, may be made to work better for those who have the needed technology by "making a connection between EDL and the traditional form of education with a view to ensuring the continuity of the educational process and improving the quality of the content created of electronic educational resources" (para. 4). Authors van der Velde, Sense, Spijkers, Meeter, and van Rijn (2021) found that given an online retrieval practice tool, high school foreign language learners' "progress through the material was largely unaffected by lockdown, although students from the highest educational track were somewhat more likely to be on or ahead of schedule than students from lower tracks" (para. 1).

Denden et al. (2021, in Betoncu, Fazli, & Odamli, 2021) noted that a learners' interest, concentration rate, and motivation contribute to greater learning. Fun and excitement (Mustiarini, 2021 in Betoncu, Fazli, & Odamli, 2021) lead to greater meaningfulness and permanence in learning, even with the help of mobile technology and gamification (Arce Valdivia, 2020, in Betoncu, Fazli, & Odamli, 2021). Betoncu and associates, hence, pointed out that the pandemic need not be a limiting factor in foreign language learning considering that "the use of technology in foreign language education enables learning toward the target language and significant improvements in motivation" (para. 6).

Online Language Learning Through Cultural Exchange

In cooperation with the Faculty of Education of Silpakorn University (Thailand), St. Paul University (SPU) Manila organized the Fil-Thai LanguageXchange Program (FLXP) online, acknowledging that a foreign language can be learned better through cultural learning. Ali, Kazemian, and Mahar (2015) recommended the "integration of cultural awareness into a language teaching programme for an overall achievement of competence in intercultural communication" (p. 1). Culture, defined by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition as the "shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and effective understanding that are learned through a process of socialisation... (help) identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group" (Williams, 2019, para. 2). Through (FLXP), SPU Manila intended to explore online language learning between Filipino and Thai college students.

Designed as a semi-structured 10-session free-flowing conversation opportunity between English Language Teaching students from Silpakorn University and their partners from the Communication and Tourism Management students of SPU Manila, they were given at least 45 minutes per meeting between August and October 2021 to talk about specific topics assigned by the program coordinators from each school and work on a common project exhibiting their shared interests and talents and featuring what they learned about each other's culture. Ultimately, more than foreign language learning or cultural appreciation, they were expected to form respectful, if not friendly, bonds with each other that will help them navigate future intersections between the two cultures. Should language learning fail, creating an openness to the other person's culture is deemed a success of the program since it has opened the door for greater learning and collaboration in the future.

Study Framework

The study is guided by the Theory of Symbolic Interactionism conceived by George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley. In general, symbolic interactionism posits:

The social world is constructed through the mundane acts of everyday social interaction. Through the repetitive act of interaction, individuals as actors in relation to social groups, constitute symbolic and shared meanings. Importantly, symbolic interactionism does not deny the unique; it is directly concerned with how distinctive meanings are adapted and interpreted through social practice (Del Casino, Jr. & Thien, 2020, para. 1).

Hence, the weekly conversations between Filipino and Thai students are considered as a mundane act which, when repeated through symbolic and shared meanings, allow for a larger socio-cultural practice not available normally on campus, especially during the pandemic. Given enough freedom to shape their conversations, the students construct interactions that are mutually meaningful on their own terms. Unlike structured foreign language learning activities in the classroom, the said conversations simulate real-world virtual conversations between two strangers who seek to make sense out of their regular conversations. Given this liberal program structure that enables each participant to shape the rules of their conversations according to what is mutually meaningful, the study assumes that the emergent rules of online cultural and language exchange work given their cultural contexts during the pandemic, which many scholars have yet to understand.

Statement of the Problem

Enabling the learners to shape their weekly interactions with minimal interventions from the coordinators, this study sought to surface areas of learning between the two cultures given the circumstances of college students during the pandemic and the loose conversation structure in the program. These areas of learning will be used to shape the direction of consequent cultural exchange programs with a new set of Thai students, and when possible, students from other countries, as well.

II. Methodology

The study is designed as exploratory qualitative research that sought to find out how an online language and culture exchange program between selected Filipino students and Thai learners can learn best from each other within a 10-session online once-a-week period between August and October 2021. The cultural exchange program uses English as the language for learning about each others' culture, including their partners' local language. The 10 sessions involved unstructured conversations between randomly paired participants from St. Paul University Manila in the Philippines and Silpakorn University in Thailand. Throughout the 10 sessions facilitated through the Zoom teleconferencing application, the participants were given three mandatory topics during the first three sessions (self, food, and weather) in breakout rooms prepared for each pair. They were free to talk about other topics after and as they prepared for their talent exhibition starting on the 7th session. After

going through the program as described previously with randomly assigned partners from the other university and country, all the student participants (24) were asked to fill in an online Google Forms survey with nine open-ended questions and five closed-ended ones. The qualitative responses were textually analyzed using thematic analysis and clustered according to the country they belonged. Later, the themes were compared to arrive at scenarios that led to greater learning for each cluster and across the two clusters.

III. Results

The narratives from the participants revealed areas of conversation that were found most engaging among both Filipino and Thai participants. These areas are presented as themes generated from actual narratives from the participants.

Conversation Topics

Popular Culture Topics. These themes point to topics that refer to media content that is popular globally. These include K-Pop (or Korean Pop) music, K-Dramas (or Korean Dramas), Netflix, and the pandemic.

K-Pop. For K-Pop, some Filipino participants shared:

We talked about K-Pop, which was amazing.

When I learned that she is also a K-Pop fan. I enjoyed that a lot because we had something that we can bond over.

We found out that we have the same interests in listening to K-Pop.

One Thai participant said, "We talked about what we were both interested in which is K-Pop (Korean popular music)." Another mentioned a specific K-Pop Girl Group, Black Pink.

Both participant groups considered, Filipino participants were more vocal about K-Pop in their responses. One mentioned K-Pop alongside K-dramas (Korean television series) and other equally interesting topics, saying, "There were a lot of times wherein we talked about our interests, favorite foods, K-Dramas, K-Pop groups, and even our dogs."

Netflix and COVID-19. A Thai participant, meanwhile, makes special mention of Netflix series. Finally, both Thais and Filipinos also mentioned talking about COVID-19. One Filipino cited sharing about "vaccination choices in (their respective) countries."

Country-Specific Common Topics. These topics include food, weather, and ethnicities.

Food. The most mentioned topic is food. Food would include drinks and desserts. Thais were particularly highlighting food and they said:

... the meeting was about food in our country.

Foods, drinks, dessert...

We enjoy talking about food! This is what we have in common.

When we were exchanging about the different food from the Philippines and Thailand, I realized that there were some similarities and we had that to bond over as well.

... she showed me her favorite food and it looks good so I decide to go traveling in the Philippines.

We talked about the food that resembles (those in) our country.

The Filipino participants mentioned food in this manner:

One memorable conversation I had with my partner is the fact that we both love food.

We shared different things about food.

Teaching me how to create a Thai dish and being proud that she did the *turon* (banana roll) really well.

Weather. The conversation about the weather struck the Filipinos more. They said:

We had a fun time, especially the talk on the weather...

In the session about the weather, I feel like we have the same thing.

For a Thai participant, what made this conversation more interesting was the "weather vocabulary".

Ethnicities. This refers to aspects of culture that are indigenous to either of the two countries or those that distinguish each country. Filipinos mentioned exchanging "fun facts about (their) countries", and "vocabulary, and (their respective) cultures" while Thais shared about "a lot about cultural things" or "so many cultural (differences) between Thai and Filipino." Some peculiarities in this regard are conversations about government and school uniforms.

Person-Specific Topics. Filipino participants showed a lot of interest in the personal details of their partners. Hence, they were able to share the following:

She showed me all her talents and we talked about (our) likes.

We talked about our personalities, we get to open up to each other about our college life and share about our personal life.

There were a lot of times wherein we talked about our interests... we actually did our own slam book-kind-of conversation wherein I asked some personal questions to her and vice versa. And I consider that moment as the most memorable interaction since we were able to know each other more.

The same was captured from the Thai participants who shared the following:

We were both just talking about random things and... what we felt before the program started. Second, (we talked about) ourselves, our friends, and the like.

We became close friends because... our personal lifestyle is mostly compatible (and)... we understand each other's personalities and respect each other. We talk to each other with an open mind.

We talked about what we were both interested in.

Clarifications and Corrections

While not all participants admit to having misconceptions about their partner's culture and country, some shared some cultural misconceptions that were corrected by the 10-week 1-hour conversations.

Vaccination Status. One Filipino participant admitted to thinking that Thais "have been doing well with the COVID(-19) vaccination". He added:

... they also need to pay for their vaccine, especially the people outside the tourism bubble.

On the other hand, a Thai participant realized the same and said: "I thought the COVID(-19) situation in the Philippines was getting better, it turned out our situations are kind of similar."

Language Barriers. Thais expressed more misconceptions that were related to the language use of Filipinos. One particularly thought Filipinos were more English-speaking than not saying that "(Majority of) Filipinos speak more in English than they speak Tagalog." Another spoke the opposite saying, "Every Filipino likes to speak Tagalog more than English. But I know from my partner that teenagers (in the Philippines) like to speak English more than Tagalog." Given that their Filipino partners reflect different competencies in the use of English as a conversational language, one Thai clarified that whatever the competency and the cultural differences, learning a new language outside of English is still possible, noting:

At first, I thought that my English skill is not good. It would be hard to communicate so... I'm going to be anxious during the session. Fortunately... even if my English is not good or our cultures (are) different, we can be good friends. We also taught each other basic English and Tagalog words. It was fun learning a new language.

One Filipino participant mentioned that "Thais have that accent that I can't understand" which was proven wrong.

Politico-economic Differences. Filipino participants were the ones who shared misconceptions about the politico-economic situation in Thailand. They shared:

I've always thought that they all rely on the tourism industry... however, I learned that it wasn't like that...

I thought that the situation (politically and economically) is so much better in Thailand because I generally thought our situation was bad. But I came to learn that we are suffering the same situation.

Weather/Seasonal Variations. One Thai mentioned thinking that the atmospheric temperature in the Philippines is higher compared to Thailand, saying:

I used to think that in the Philippines the weather is hotter than that of Thailand but they are the same.

Another Thai said:

I thought the Philippines has three seasons like Thailand, but it has only two (wet and dry).

Food Preferences. One Filipino participant mentioned thinking that “all Thai people love spicy foods.” On the other hand, one Thai participant said that people in the “Philippines don’t like Thai foods.” Both misconceptions were corrected by the conversations.

Other Marginal Misconceptions. A couple of Filipino participants were corrected in their perception that Thais are snobby (“Thai people are snobby and not approachable”; “Thais are snobby.”). One Filipino participant mentioned perceiving Thais as highly valu(ing) other religions. They were proven wrong.

Practical Learnings

Filipino and Thai participants highlighted three areas where they learned more about things that have great use in their daily lives: food, language use, and life guides.

Food. Both Thais and Filipinos have great interest in food, new knowledge on which were cited as valuable to their daily lives. The Filipinos underscored preparing Thai “ingredients” and “dishes”. The Thais highlighted easy-to-do food and easy-to-find ingredients (in the champorado or chocolate porridge) which can be cooked at home.

Language Use. Thais mentioned being able to use English when speaking with new people “confidently” as a “more communicative person”, and engaging in online gaming and simple Filipino conversations. Meanwhile, Filipinos took pride in using simple Thai greetings in their daily lives, being able to teach their friends the Thai language, and socializing and communicating properly.

Life Guides. Filipinos and Thais acknowledge having learned how to live life better through their conversation partners. The areas in their lives that were identified as having been positively influenced by their conversation partners are as follows: (1) prioritizing the self (“I learned that... putting myself first... is okay.”); (2) independence (“That being independent is scary but... worth it.”); (3) “fighting spirit”; (4) “positive thinking”; (5) enjoyment and fun (“to always enjoy life”; “she doesn't overthink... and enjoys her hobbies... I try to be like her”); (6) open-mindedness (“If we are open-minded and respect others, we won't miss a good chance of getting to know new friends.”); (7) proper behavior (“how to interact and not to behave.”); (8) greater learning (“... to learn more new things”; “meet different people and it's even nice if they are from another country or culture”; “I should not be shy to make mistakes.”; “I should join more programs like these.”); (9) experience (“... meeting her was a great experience”); and (10) friendship (“I earned myself a good friend.”).

IV. Discussion

The conversation topics that emerged as points of active engagement during the program reveal that within the 10-session period, the participants were capable of deepening their conversations from surface-level topics (food, weather, and ethnicities) to deeply personal ones (person-specific topics and life guides). Correcting misconceptions was instrumental in breaking the barriers that inhibit deeper conversations. Finding common areas of interest at the surface level topics facilitated shared comfort zones that made it easier to deal with more sensitive issues in later conversations. Thus, arranging topics of conversations from shared pop culture, to country-specific, and person-specific topics seems to show a positive topic progression. Allowing the students to choose their preferred topics outside of the mandatory ones and the official conversation periods allowed the conversation partners to shape their interactions according to the specificities of the developing relationship between them. Hence, it was not difficult to perform tasks for the talent program in the final leg of the program since they have found areas of compatibility that made it easier to negotiate targets and challenge each other.

The results also revealed that fun and positive topics like food allow for sensorial experiences. Neutral topics like the weather stimulate neutral questions and the use of language that is more science-based. And yet, sensitive issues like COVID-19, politico-economic issues, and even religion must not be avoided given the limited time since the responses show that they are completely capable of handling them despite cultural differences. They should, however, be dealt with once they have found common ground and earned each other's respect through the sharing of personal information. This means that conversations can progress to more challenging topics when friendships have taken root, which paves the way for more collaborative cultural activities near the end of the program.

The results also revealed that Symbolic Interactionism's "social world" was, indeed constructed in the limited online conversations of the participants. Their responses point to shared meanings between Filipinos and Thais, despite their cultural differences and language barriers. It also shows that the use of Zoom, while limited, can function to help construct the social world needed for cultural exchange between Thais and Filipinos from a public university (Silpakorn University) and a sectarian (Catholic) university (St. Paul University Manila) even if only virtually. It is good to note that this is the first social world constructed between the students from each university participating in the online cultural exchange program. The results reveal that the program can be continued and further improved structurally given the above data.

Given the constructed social world of the Fil-Thai Cultural Exchange Program, it should be important to mention that after they were asked about their intention to travel to their partners' home country, the majority (83.3%) have "vacation" as their main motivation for travel, followed by "exploration" (70.8%), and gaining "more friends" (70.8%). This means that majority prefer to be free to enjoy their partner's home country. Official tasks like "study" (50%) and "business" (12.5%) are not reasons enough to travel to Thailand or the Philippines. Hence, it could be seen that while the program was organized by universities, the conversations had very little impact on the participants' desire to study in their partner's home country. It suggests that the cultural exchange program, as it was designed, is not fit effectively to market educational experiences to college students, and as such, a redesign must be done to use the program as a tool to attract international students to either university. Nevertheless, as Mustiarni (2021 in Betoncu, Fazli, & Odamlı, 2021) fun and excitement, emerging from vacationing, exploration, and enjoying with friends paves the way to greater meaningfulness and permanence in learning. This suggests that the motivations for traveling to their partners' home countries can help create a good foundation for studying abroad.

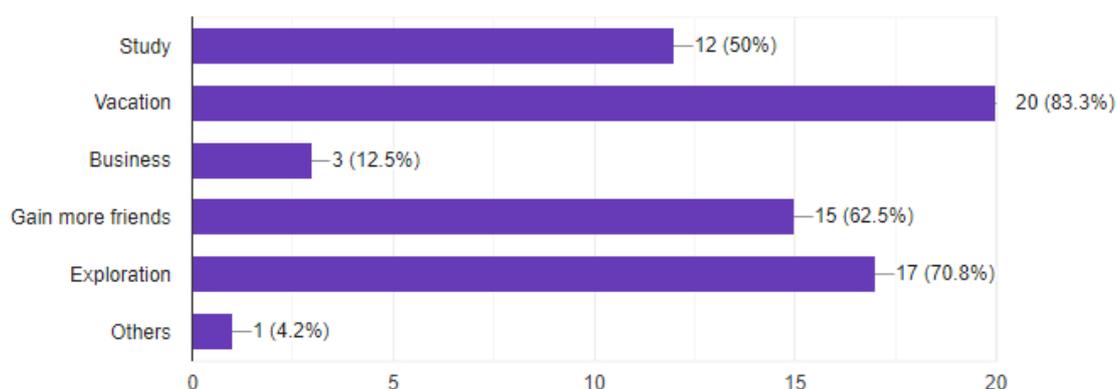


Figure 1. Motivations for traveling to the learning partner's home country

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