

FOSTERING EFL STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH THE PEN PALS PROJECT IN THE CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING COURSE

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Abstract

Authentic spoken interaction remains difficult to provide in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly when students have limited access to interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds. This study examined the contribution of a digitally mediated Pen Pals Project to university students' speaking development and engagement in a Cross-Cultural Understanding course. Previous pen-pal studies have largely emphasized written exchanges, younger learners, or general language motivation; less attention has been given to synchronous video interaction in higher education and to the combined roles of engagement, speaking performance, and intercultural content. A descriptive mixed-methods design was employed. Data were collected from a 20-item questionnaire completed by 36 English Education students, semi-structured interviews with five participants, and documentation of video-call interactions. Questionnaire responses were summarized descriptively, while interview and video data were analyzed thematically and used for triangulation. The findings indicate strong emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. Students perceived improvement in pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, idea expression, and comprehension, although grammatical accuracy remained less consistent. Cultural topics encouraged curiosity, reciprocal questioning, clarification, and communicative adaptation, thereby extending the project beyond language practice alone. The results suggest that structured video-based pen-pal projects can provide an authentic and culturally meaningful environment for speaking practice when teachers offer clear preparation, suitable cultural prompts, and reflective follow-up activities.

Keywords: cross-cultural understanding; engagement; pen pals project; speaking skills

1. INTRODUCTION

English functions as an important medium for international communication, education, mobility, and the exchange of information (Pandarangga, 2016). In EFL contexts, however, students often learn English in environments where opportunities

for sustained interaction outside the classroom are limited. This condition can limit how often students practice listening and speaking, especially with interlocutors who use different accents, expressions, and communicative styles. Limited exposure may also increase anxiety, reduce confidence, and encourage students to focus on avoiding errors rather than communicating meaning. Pawlak et al. (2021) show that emotional experiences influence learners' willingness to remain involved in language learning, while Harackiewicz et al. (2016) emphasize that interest supports attention, persistence, and meaningful participation. Consequently, speaking instruction needs activities that are not only linguistically purposeful but also personally engaging and socially authentic. Teachers therefore need to provide media and interactional tasks that encourage students to initiate conversation, respond spontaneously, negotiate meaning, and sustain communication over time (Puspitarini & Hanif, 2019).

The integration of culture into language learning can strengthen this communicative purpose. Byram and Wagner (2018) argue that language education should develop intercultural competence, critical reflection, and the ability to adapt communication across cultural differences. Cultural topics give learners reasons to compare experiences, ask questions, explain local practices, and interpret perspectives that may differ from their own. Digital literacy further expands these opportunities by allowing learners to produce, exchange, and discuss multimodal content with partners beyond their immediate environment (Clarke, 2020). A pen-pal relationship, traditionally associated with written letters, can now include messaging, audio, and synchronous video calls. This expanded form enables students to use English for relationship building and real-time interaction rather than merely for completing a classroom exercise. Valenti Puspa et al. (2022) demonstrate that digitally mediated global connections can support language learning, while Lee (2021) highlights the value of pen-pal activities for engagement and reflection. In a Cross-Cultural Understanding course, such interaction is particularly relevant because students can connect linguistic choices with cultural meanings and actual interpersonal responses.

Despite these benefits, several gaps remain in the existing literature. Much of the earlier work on pen-pal projects has focused on written correspondence, young learners, or broad motivational outcomes. Studies that involve digital exchange frequently discuss global connection or literacy development but provide limited explanation of how synchronous video conversations influence university EFL students' pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, grammar, comprehension, and expression of ideas. In addition, engagement is often treated as a general positive response rather than examined through emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. The pedagogical role of cultural content also requires closer attention: cultural topics may not simply decorate a speaking task but may generate questions, communicative repair, perspective taking, and sustained interaction. Evidence drawn only from self-report data can further leave uncertainty about whether students' stated perceptions are reflected in their observable behavior during interaction. The present study addresses these gaps by combining questionnaire data, interviews, and video-call documentation in a university Cross-Cultural Understanding course. It investigates two questions: (1) how do EFL students perceive their emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement during the Pen Pals Project, and (2) how do they perceive the project's contribution to speaking development and cross-cultural understanding?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Authentic interaction is important for developing speaking ability in EFL contexts because learners need opportunities to use language for communicative purposes. Speaking involves more than production of isolated forms; it requires learners to organize ideas, select vocabulary, maintain fluency, make pronunciation intelligible, and respond in real time (Brown, 2004). Classroom activities can provide structured practice, but they may not reproduce the unpredictability of communication. Action-oriented speaking activities can increase participation when learners exchange information and respond actively rather than reproduce memorized language (Putra et al., 2022). Digitally mediated pen-pal projects extend this principle by connecting learners with partners. Valenti Puspa et al. (2022) show that technology-supported global connections can create opportunities for English use, while Lee (2021) emphasizes that pen-pal activities encourage reflection and involvement. Synchronous video interaction is relevant because it combines verbal language, gesture, feedback, and spontaneous turn-taking.

The value of such interaction is related to student engagement. Trowler (2010) conceptualizes engagement through emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. Emotional engagement includes interest, enjoyment, and confidence; behavioral engagement concerns participation, effort, attention, and persistence; cognitive engagement involves preparation, strategy use, monitoring, and reflection. These dimensions are connected in speaking activities. Interest can encourage learners to enter a conversation, participation gives them opportunities to practice, and cognitive effort helps them manage vocabulary or communication problems. Harackiewicz et al. (2016) argue that interest supports attention and sustained effort, whereas Pawlak et al. (2021) demonstrate that emotional experiences shape learners' involvement in university language learning. Online environments do not automatically guarantee engagement. Motivation may decrease when learners feel isolated, unprepared, or uncertain about task expectations (Meşe et al., 2019). Digital speaking projects therefore require clear purposes, preparation, and interactional support.

Pen-pal conversations may support speaking development by exposing learners to communicative pressure that is difficult to simulate through written exchange. Learners must understand accents and expressions, retrieve vocabulary quickly, formulate responses, and negotiate meaning when misunderstanding occurs. Communication strategies such as repetition, paraphrase, clarification requests, gesture, and examples enable speakers to maintain interaction despite unequal linguistic resources (Romadlon, 2016). These strategies position communication breakdowns as opportunities for adjustment rather than evidence of failure. Repeated interaction may increase confidence as learners become familiar with their partners and notice progress. Nevertheless, perceived improvement in fluency or pronunciation should be distinguished from measured proficiency when evidence is based on self-report.

Intercultural content gives pen-pal interaction a meaningful purpose. Byram and Wagner (2018) maintain that language education should prepare learners for intercultural dialogue through openness, reflection, perspective taking, and communicative adaptability. Digital literacy enables learners to exchange information and encounter perspectives outside their local environment (Clarke, 2020). Cultural topics create information gaps because students explain familiar practices while learning about experiences. Song and Xia (2021) indicate that intercultural communication involves negotiating meaning across social and cultural frames. Thus,

a video-based Pen Pals Project can integrate language practice, engagement, and intercultural learning. However, research remains limited on how these elements operate together among university EFL students and how self-reported experiences correspond with observable interaction during authentic conversations.

3. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods design. The design was selected because the study combined numerical summaries of students' questionnaire responses with qualitative accounts from interviews and video-call documentation. The quantitative component was descriptive rather than experimental; the percentages were used to show response patterns and were not intended to establish a causal effect. The qualitative component was used to explain how students experienced the project, how they engaged in interaction, and how cultural topics shaped their speaking practice. Combining the two forms of evidence enabled the researchers to interpret the questionnaire trends in relation to students' accounts and observable interactional behavior (Creswell, 2017).

The participants were 36 students from the English Education Department who completed the Pen Pals Project in a Cross-Cultural Understanding course in 2024. All 36 students responded to the questionnaire, and five students who had completed the project participated in semi-structured interviews. The principal data concerned students' perspectives on their engagement, speaking development, and use of cultural content during video-call conversations with their pen pals. The study also used available video-call recordings as documentation to support comparison across data sources. Thus, the questionnaire provided the overall response pattern, the interviews supplied detailed explanations of students' experiences, and the recordings offered contextual evidence of how interaction occurred during the project.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 scale-based items developed from the study's focus on student engagement and speaking skills. Engagement items represented emotional responses, behavioral participation, and cognitive effort, following Trowler's (2010) framework. Speaking-related items addressed pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, expression of ideas, and comprehension. The semi-structured interview guide invited students to describe their preparation, emotional responses, interactional challenges, perceived language development, and experiences of discussing cultural topics. Interview responses were recorded and organized according to recurring themes. The video documentation was reviewed for observable indicators such as initiation and response, turn-taking, sustained attention, use of follow-up questions, communication repair, and references to cultural experiences.

Questionnaire responses were calculated as descriptive percentages for each item. The interview data were read repeatedly and categorized according to emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement, intercultural learning, and perceived speaking development. Video-call documentation was then compared with the questionnaire and interview results to determine whether the three data sources converged. For example, reported active participation was checked against evidence of reciprocal questioning and turn-taking, while reported comprehension difficulties were compared with instances of clarification, gesture, paraphrase, or repetition. This triangulation did not function as a formal assessment of speaking proficiency; instead, it strengthened the interpretation of students' perspectives by connecting self-reported experience with contextual evidence from the recorded interactions.

4. FINDINGS

The findings are presented through three related areas: student engagement, perceived speaking development, and the contribution of cultural content. The questionnaire percentages describe the overall tendencies among the 36 participants, while interview accounts and video-call documentation provide explanatory and contextual support. Following Trowler (2010), engagement was interpreted through emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions.

Students reported a high level of participation in the video-call conversations. A total of 86.1% indicated active involvement, and 97.2% reported making substantial effort to initiate or respond to their pen pals. Interest and curiosity were also prominent: 91.6% were interested in the conversations, while 86.1% were curious about the topics discussed. These results suggest that the project created an interactional purpose that encouraged students to move beyond passive attendance and to contribute directly to the exchange.

Emotional responses were predominantly positive. Most students enjoyed participating in the video calls (88.9%), and 97.2% regarded the project as an enjoyable or memorable experience. A further 83.4% described the video-call activity as fun. Behavioral and cognitive engagement, however, showed a more differentiated pattern. Although 83.3% reported maintaining focus during the conversation, only 58.3% indicated consistent discipline in practicing their speaking before the calls. The difference suggests that immediate interaction with a pen pal generated strong involvement, whereas independent preparation was less consistent across participants.

Students also perceived development in several components of speaking. Approximately 86% reported better pronunciation, and 75% felt that they could pronounce words more clearly. Vocabulary growth was reported by 83.3% of the students, while 77.8% believed that they could recall and use appropriate vocabulary during interaction. Grammar remained the least secure area. Only 36.1% expressed confidence that they consistently used correct grammar, even though 69.5% felt that their spoken grammar had improved to some extent. This pattern indicates that students prioritized intelligibility and continuity of meaning when they had to respond in real time.

Perceived gains were also evident in fluency, idea expression, and comprehension. A total of 86.1% reported that they could express ideas more clearly and effectively, and 69.5% perceived improvement in fluency. Seventy-five percent felt able to understand their pen pals' speech and cultural references, while 86.1% believed that preparation and repeated interaction improved their ability to interpret different accents, expressions, and cultural nuances. The video-call documentation supported these trends. The recordings contained recurring examples of reciprocal questions, follow-up responses, laughter, life updates, gesture-supported explanation, and clarification when words were unavailable. Cultural comparisons frequently extended turn length and prompted students to explain local routines or ask for further information. These observations corroborated the interview accounts by showing that engagement and speaking practice were embedded in two-way intercultural interaction rather than in isolated language production.

5. DISCUSSION

The combined findings show that the Pen Pals Project functioned as more than an additional speaking exercise. It created a socially meaningful environment in which students used English to establish relationships, exchange cultural information, and manage the unpredictability of real-time communication. The questionnaire identified broad response patterns, while the interviews and video documentation explained how enjoyment, reciprocal participation, preparation, and cultural curiosity shaped those patterns. The discussion therefore interprets speaking development together with engagement and intercultural learning rather than treating them as separate outcomes.

Students' Engagement in the Pen Pals Project

Trowler's (2010) framework is useful because engagement includes the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive investment that students bring to an activity. In the present project, the three dimensions were mutually reinforcing. Positive emotions encouraged students to enter the conversation, reciprocal interaction required behavioral participation, and the need to sustain meaning prompted preparation, monitoring, and strategic language use. This interaction among dimensions helps explain why students could remain involved even when they experienced nervousness, lexical gaps, or uncertainty about grammatical accuracy.

Emotional engagement emerged through enjoyment, curiosity, and a growing sense of comfort. The interaction was meaningful because students were speaking with an actual partner rather than rehearsing for an imagined classroom situation. The expectation of hearing a different perspective created anticipation, while informal conversation and shared humor reduced the distance between participants. This finding is consistent with Harackiewicz et al. (2016), who position interest as an important condition for sustained attention and effort. It also supports Lee's (2021) conclusion that pen-pal activities can become memorable learning experiences when students recognize the personal value of the exchange.

Curiosity was especially important because it transformed assigned topics into genuine questions. Students did not merely recite prepared information; they needed to listen to their partners' answers, identify unfamiliar details, and formulate appropriate follow-up questions. This process made the conversations less predictable and therefore more communicatively demanding. At the same time, uncertainty was productive: students had a reason to continue listening because the answer could not be known in advance. Such curiosity can help teachers move speaking practice away from short, display-oriented responses toward longer and more responsive interaction.

The project also supported relationship building. Repeated contact allowed students to exchange life updates, compare experiences, and develop continuity between one conversation and the next. This relational dimension matters in EFL learning because willingness to communicate is influenced not only by language ability but also by whether speakers feel recognized and supported. When a partner responds with interest rather than immediate correction, students can take linguistic risks without interpreting every error as failure. The resulting sense of interpersonal safety appears to have contributed to confidence and persistence.

The interview evidence reinforced this interpretation. Students described initial nervousness that gradually decreased as the conversations became more familiar and informal. They also associated improvement with the continuity of the relationship: feedback from a returning partner enabled them to notice changes in their own speaking over time. These accounts show that emotional engagement was

not simply momentary enjoyment. It involved a developing sense of trust, recognition, and personal relevance that encouraged students to continue communicating.

Emotional engagement should nevertheless be understood as a pedagogical resource rather than an automatic result of digital interaction. A video call can also create pressure when students are unsure what to say or fear misunderstanding their partner. Teachers therefore need to prepare students with flexible prompts, topic vocabulary, and strategies for requesting clarification. Such support can preserve the authenticity of the interaction while reducing avoidable anxiety. The goal is not to script every sentence but to give students enough structure to participate confidently and respond spontaneously.

The video documentation supported these perceptions. Moments of laughter, relaxed life updates, and continued conversation after a temporary misunderstanding indicated that positive emotion was connected to interactional persistence. The recordings also showed that comfort did not eliminate challenge; students still paused, reformulated ideas, and searched for words. The value of the project lay in students' willingness to remain in the interaction despite these difficulties. Emotional engagement therefore operated as a condition that helped students tolerate communicative uncertainty and continue speaking.

Students' Behavioral Engagement in the Pen Pals Project

Behavioral engagement was visible in students' active contribution to the video calls. Participation required them to initiate topics, answer questions, listen for relevant information, and maintain the exchange through follow-up responses. Unlike teacher-fronted speaking activities, the interaction distributed responsibility between two partners. Students could not depend entirely on the lecturer to manage turn-taking or repair a misunderstanding. This responsibility encouraged more direct involvement and made each contribution consequential for the continuity of the conversation.

Reciprocity was central to this behavioral involvement. Students felt more engaged when their pen pals also asked questions and showed interest in their experiences. Two-way communication reduced the impression that the students were being tested and instead positioned them as legitimate contributors with knowledge to share. Romadlon (2016) notes that communication between learners and more proficient speakers can involve unequal linguistic resources. In this project, reciprocal questioning helped moderate that imbalance because both participants alternated between explaining, listening, and learning.

Behavioral engagement also appeared in the strategies used to keep communication moving. Students relied on gestures, repetition, paraphrase, examples, and occasional assistance when an intended word was unavailable. These behaviors are important because successful speaking does not depend solely on producing error-free sentences; it also involves managing breakdowns and making meaning accessible to an interlocutor. The recordings showed that repair strategies frequently allowed the conversation to continue rather than end after a vocabulary or comprehension problem.

These findings suggest that project design should make reciprocity explicit. Students can be asked to prepare both information to share and questions that invite comparison, but they should also be encouraged to depart from the prompt when an interesting topic emerges. A reflection sheet can help them record which questions generated longer exchanges, which repair strategies were effective, and what they learned from their partner. Such activities would make behavioral engagement visible

and help students transfer successful interactional strategies to future speaking situations.

Students' Cognitive Engagement in the Pen Pals Project

Cognitive engagement was reflected in students' preparation, concentration, and attempts to regulate their own performance. Some students practiced possible conversations before the call, reviewed vocabulary, or anticipated questions that their partners might ask. During the interaction, they needed to monitor comprehension, choose words quickly, and decide whether an error required correction or whether communication could continue. These processes indicate active investment in meaning rather than mechanical participation.

The lower level of consistent pre-call practice compared with in-call focus is pedagogically significant. The authentic presence of a communication partner appears to have generated immediate concentration, but not all students translated that motivation into systematic preparation. This distinction suggests that engagement during an enjoyable task does not automatically produce independent learning habits. Teachers may need to scaffold preparation through short rehearsal cycles, personal vocabulary banks, peer planning, or goal-setting activities that connect preparation directly to the upcoming conversation.

Interview accounts showed that students who practiced independently viewed repetition as a way to build readiness rather than memorize a fixed script. They rehearsed possible explanations and familiarized themselves with key expressions so that they could respond more confidently. Frequent conversations also created repeated opportunities to notice gaps between intended and actual performance. This cycle of preparation, interaction, and reflection can support cognitive engagement because students use previous experience to adjust strategies for subsequent calls.

The project therefore has potential to foster learner autonomy when reflection is deliberately incorporated. After a call, students can identify vocabulary they needed but could not retrieve, expressions they misunderstood, cultural assumptions that required clarification, and strategies that helped them recover from communication difficulties. These observations can become individual learning targets for the next interaction. Without such follow-up, the project may remain enjoyable but produce less systematic development. Cognitive engagement is strengthened when students are guided to transform experience into specific decisions about future learning.

Cultural Content in the Pen Pals Project

Cultural content was not a supplementary theme in this project; it was the central resource that gave students something meaningful to communicate. Questions about daily routines, education, celebrations, food, social relationships, and local practices allowed participants to speak from personal knowledge while also encountering unfamiliar perspectives. This balance reduced the cognitive burden of inventing content and simultaneously created an authentic information gap. Students knew their own context but needed English to make it understandable to someone whose assumptions could differ.

The intercultural value of the interaction extended beyond acquiring factual information. When partners described practices differently, students had to interpret why those differences existed, avoid premature judgment, and adjust their explanations. Song and Xia (2021) show that intercultural communication involves negotiating meanings across different social and cultural frames. In the Pen Pals Project, clarification questions and comparisons provided opportunities for this

negotiation. Students practiced not only what to say but also how to respond respectfully when a partner's experience did not match their expectations.

The interview and video evidence indicated that cultural topics often generated longer and more spontaneous exchanges. Students became more willing to elaborate when they were asked to explain familiar local practices, and they showed curiosity when a partner introduced an unfamiliar custom or expression. These interactions linked language, identity, and relationship building. Cultural learning therefore occurred through dialogue: participants explained their own perspectives, listened to alternative accounts, and revised their understanding through follow-up questions rather than receiving culture as a fixed list of facts.

This interpretation is consistent with Byram and Wagner's (2018) view that language education should prepare learners for intercultural and international dialogue. In a Cross-Cultural Understanding course, the pedagogical objective is not simply to imitate a native-speaker model. Students need to develop openness, perspective taking, critical awareness, and communicative adaptability. The Pen Pals Project supported these aims by placing students in situations where linguistic choices had immediate interpersonal consequences. Teachers can deepen this learning by selecting prompts that encourage comparison without stereotyping, asking students to distinguish observation from assumption, and organizing reflective discussions about moments of surprise, misunderstanding, or changed perspective.

Students' Speaking Development in the Pen Pals Project

Students perceived improvement in pronunciation because repeated video interaction required them to make words intelligible to a real listener. When a partner asked for repetition or responded successfully, students received immediate evidence about whether their speech was understandable. This feedback was naturally embedded in communication rather than delivered only as a teacher's correction. Brown (2004) identifies pronunciation as one component of speaking performance, but the present findings suggest that pronunciation became meaningful to students primarily through its contribution to intelligibility.

Vocabulary development was similarly connected to communicative need. Cultural topics exposed students to expressions that were not always available in their prepared materials, while the pressure to explain local practices made lexical gaps noticeable. Students could learn new words from their partners, recall previously learned vocabulary, or use paraphrase when an exact term was unavailable. This process supports a more functional view of vocabulary learning: words are retained not merely because they appear in a list but because they help the speaker complete a personally meaningful act of communication.

Grammar presented a more complex pattern. Students generally believed that their speaking improved, yet they were less confident about consistently producing correct grammatical forms. The interview evidence showed that some students intentionally placed grammatical monitoring behind pronunciation and meaning because excessive attention to form interrupted fluency. This does not imply that grammar is unimportant. Rather, real-time interaction created a trade-off among accuracy, speed, and intelligibility, especially for learners who had limited processing time.

The grammar finding has a clear instructional implication. Teachers should avoid turning every video call into continuous error correction, since this could reduce willingness to communicate. A more productive sequence is to allow meaning-focused interaction first and then use selected excerpts or student reflections for

delayed language focus. Recurring grammatical problems can be addressed after the call through mini-lessons, reformulation, or guided self-correction. In this way, the project can preserve fluency and confidence while still supporting gradual development of accuracy.

Fluency and comprehension were supported by repeated exposure to naturally paced speech, different accents, and unpredictable responses. Students had to process meaning, organize ideas, and respond within the same interaction, which more closely resembles communication outside the classroom than isolated drills. The project also showed that speaking development was intertwined with intercultural understanding: students spoke more because they had meaningful cultural content, and they understood culture more deeply because they had to negotiate it through language. Nevertheless, the results represent students' perceptions and descriptive observations rather than standardized evidence of proficiency gains. The strongest pedagogical contribution of the project is therefore its capacity to create authentic, sustained, and reflective opportunities for speaking that can complement, not replace, systematic instruction and formal assessment.

6. CONCLUSION

The study indicates that a video-based Pen Pals Project can foster EFL students' speaking practice by integrating authentic interaction, student engagement, and intercultural learning. Students reported strong emotional and behavioral involvement and perceived gains in pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, expression of ideas, and comprehension. Grammar remained the most challenging component, suggesting that students often prioritized intelligibility and continuity of meaning during real-time interaction. Cultural content gave the conversations a clear purpose and encouraged reciprocal questioning, clarification, perspective taking, and communicative adaptation. For EFL educators, the project can be implemented more effectively when students receive flexible cultural prompts, preparation support, explicit communication-repair strategies, and post-call reflection that connects experience with language goals. Delayed feedback can also help teachers address recurring grammatical problems without interrupting fluency during the exchange. The study is limited by its small, single-course sample, reliance on self-reported improvement, and the absence of a standardized pre-test and post-test measure of speaking proficiency. The video documentation supported contextual interpretation but was not analyzed through a formal interactional coding scheme. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, compare different types or frequencies of pen-pal interaction, and combine perception data with validated speaking assessments and systematic analysis of recorded conversations. Longitudinal research would also help determine whether engagement, intercultural relationships, and perceived speaking gains are sustained after the course ends.

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