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A Diary-Based Analysis of Intercultural Communication in a Virtual Collaborative Project

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this dissertation is to examine the evolving perceptions among a cohort of students engaged in a virtual project. By analysing a collection of diaries and reflective papers, this study aims to illustrate the dynamic shifts in group perceptions over the course of the project. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research encompasses the thorough examination of both diaries and reflective papers.

The principal inquiries guiding this investigation are twofold: Firstly, what is the influence of intercultural communication within a virtual setting on the attainment of communicative objectives? Specifically, this entails an examination of the challenges encountered and strategies employed to achieve successful communication across diverse cultural backgrounds. Secondly, how do students' perceptions of virtual collaborative endeavours, particularly their experiences during interactive sessions, vary across diverse national contexts? Furthermore, to what extent do these perceptions evolve or transform over the project's duration, as evidenced in their recorded diaries?

Throughout the dissertation, an in-depth exploration of these research questions will be conducted, drawing upon the rich data obtained from participants' diaries and reflective papers. The qualitative analysis will delve into the intricacies of intercultural communication dynamics within the virtual project context, shedding light on the nuanced interactions, challenges, and successes experienced by the student cohort.

Moreover, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on intercultural communication by offering empirical insights into the implications of virtual collaboration on cross-cultural understanding and communication effectiveness. By examining the evolution of perceptions over time, this research aims to provide valuable insights for educators, practitioners, and policymakers involved in designing and facilitating intercultural learning experiences in virtual environments.

Ultimately, through a comprehensive examination of shifting perceptions and experiences documented by participants, this dissertation endeavours to deepen our understanding of the complexities inherent in intercultural communication within virtual collaborative settings.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the dynamics of intercultural communication and the development of communicative competencies in virtual settings, using the Soliya Connect Program as a case study. Through an analysis of diaries and reflective papers written by students from the University of Padua participating in the program, the research examines how students' perceptions and intercultural communication skills evolved over the course of the virtual exchange with peers from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds.

The study corpus consists of weekly diaries and final reflective papers written by students, capturing personal reflections on the challenges and learning experiences associated with engaging with individuals from other cultures. These texts provide authentic insights into students' emotional and cognitive journeys as they navigated intercultural communication challenges, including language barriers, initial anxiety, and the process of building interpersonal bonds and intercultural competencies over time.

This research is grounded in theories of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and Virtual Mobility, with foundational insights from scholars such as Byram (1997) and O'Dowd (2017). These theoretical frameworks are useful to understand how virtual mobility and intercultural competence can foster meaningful dialogue across cultures, effectively bridging geographic distances and promoting mutual understanding.

The data analysis process involved several key stages. First, the diaries and reflective papers were gathered and systematically organized. Then, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes, and tables and charts were developed to visually represent trends in key themes such as anxiety, sadness, and language barriers over the eight weeks of exchange. The findings were summarized in tables, illustrating, for example, trends in anxiety levels, linguistic challenges, and emotional responses as the program concluded, thus facilitating a comparative interpretation of the data.

The thesis is organized into three main chapters. The first Chapter provides a theoretical foundation on intercultural communication and virtual mobility, exploring key concepts

such as Intercultural Communicative Competence and the role of guided dialogue in promoting intercultural empathy. The chapter introduces the Soliya Connect Program within the context of virtual mobility as a tool for intercultural training in academic settings.

The second Chapter presents a detailed analysis of student diaries and reflective papers, highlighting challenges students faced, including anxiety and language barriers, and strategies they employed to address these challenges. The chapter includes tables showing the weekly progression of these experiences, documenting how students gradually overcame emotional and linguistic barriers through structured interaction and the support of a facilitator.

Finally, the third Chapter reflects on the study's findings, addressing the research questions about how students' perceptions of intercultural interactions transformed in a virtual context. It discusses the program's impact on reducing anxiety, overcoming language barriers, and fostering meaningful social connections, ultimately demonstrating how virtual mobility can cultivate empathy and intercultural awareness.

CHAPTER 1

Intercultural Communication

As this dissertation aims to explore the perceptions of a group of students engaged in a virtual project, I will first focus on the field of intercultural communication. I will take into account what intercultural communication is about, its intricacies and the relationship with culture. Moreover, I will provide an explanation of what intercultural communicative competence is. Secondly, I will draw attention to what virtual mobility is. An explanation of the role of virtual mobility will be provided in order to better comprehend its relationship with intercultural communication in contexts such as Soliya, which will be covered in the next section. Finally, I will attempt to analyse the relationship that exists between intercultural communication and virtual mobility; in particular, I will introduce the Soliya project.

1.1 Intercultural Communication: Meaning and Implications

At the heart of intercultural communication lies the exchange of ideas, experiences, and perspectives between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Piller 2011). As Croucher et al. (2015:71) state, “intercultural communication has typically been defined as communication between individuals from different national assets”. As Piller (2011) states, “intercultural communication, as a discipline, is primarily oriented towards understanding and effectively managing the multifaceted dynamics inherent in international cultural diversity”. This involves exploring a wide array of cultural differences, ranging from customs and traditions to language nuances, and developing strategies to foster mutual understanding and successful interaction across diverse cultural contexts (Piller 2011).

Kang (2022:3) suggests that intercultural communication involves the interpersonal exchanges occurring among individuals or groups from divergent cultural backgrounds, often shaped by distinct cultural norms, values, and linguistic environments. This process involves navigating the complexities arising from diverse cultural affiliations and varied socialization experiences, which significantly influence communication dynamics (Kang 2022:3). Within this framework, interaction goes beyond mere linguistic exchanges, encompassing, as Kang (2022:3) states, a rich tapestry of cultural nuances and contextual

sensitivities. In the pursuit of effective intercultural communication, a pivotal aspect lies in addressing and effectively managing the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety that often accompany cross-cultural interactions (Croucher et al., 2015:74). This emotional turbulence can be traced back to negative preconceptions or expectations individuals might harbor regarding the host culture (Croucher, Sommier, Rahmani, 2015:74). By acknowledging and actively working through these emotions, individuals can foster a more open and receptive mindset, facilitating smoother intercultural exchanges and deeper mutual understanding (Croucher et al., 2015:74).

1.1.1 Intercultural Communication Research

As regards intercultural communication research, Zhu (2019 in Baker, 2022:22) states that it is predominantly focused on exploring the intricate processes by which individuals, in their pursuit of communication objectives, navigate a myriad of cultural or linguistic differences that may be perceived as relevant by at least one party involved in the interaction. This suggests a recognition of the multifaceted nature of intercultural communication, where various factors, including differing cultural backgrounds and linguistic nuances, play pivotal roles in shaping communicative exchanges (Zhu, 2019). Beyond this, Zhu's perspective aligns with the broader dynamic model of intercultural communication, which emphasizes that intercultural interactions are not merely about managing differences but also involve negotiating meaning, identities, and power relations (Baker, 2022).

This approach underscores the importance of understanding contextual factors, such as historical relations between cultures, socio-political environments, and individual experiences, which all influence the ways in which cultural differences are perceived and negotiated (Zhu, 2019). Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of intercultural communicative competence, where effective interaction relies not only on linguistic ability but also on the capacity to understand and engage with the culturally nuanced meanings that arise during communication (Byram, 1997). Thus, intercultural communication research continues to evolve, acknowledging the complexity of interactions in a globalized world, where cultural and linguistic diversity is becoming increasingly pronounced in both face-to-face and virtual settings (O'Dowd, 2021).

1.1.2 Intercultural Communicative Competence

To better comprehend what these factors are about is crucial to understand the role of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). ICC is the ability to communicate effectively and interact with people from different cultural backgrounds (Byram, Golubeva, Hui, Wagner 2017). Bălcescu (2019:265) refers to ICC as “the active possession of qualities that facilitate effective communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds”. The above-mentioned qualities encompass attitudes, knowledge, and intercultural awareness, each playing a crucial role in fostering meaningful and respectful interactions (Bălcescu 2019:265). ICC involves understanding and respecting cultural differences, as well as being able to adapt communication styles to fit different cultural contexts (Byram, Golubeva, Hui, Wagner 2017). It is essential for fostering positive intercultural relationships and successful communication in a globalized world (Byram, Golubeva, Hui, Wagner 2017). As stated before, intercultural awareness is a critical aspect of ICC, which involves recognizing both the cultural diversity in the world and the specific ways in which cultures differ (Bălcescu 2019:265). It requires an understanding of one’s own cultural framework and how it shapes perceptions and behaviours (Bălcescu 2019:265).

1.1.3 Interculturality and Empathy

Interculturality examines how people utilize their cultural backgrounds and identities during interactions, highlighting that cultural identities are constructed, evolving, and continuously negotiated (Baker 2022:22-23). It is not merely about exchanging ideas and information across cultural boundaries; rather, it involves understanding and negotiating the deep-seated beliefs, values, and norms that shape individuals’ worldviews (Croucher, Sommier, Rahmani, 2015). This perspective highlights how cultural identities are not fixed or inherent but are shaped and reshaped through communication and social exchanges (Baker 2022:22-23). It also considers the ways in which power dynamics, context, and personal experiences influence how individuals express and perceive their cultural affiliations (Baker 2022:22-23). By focusing on the interactive nature of cultural identities, interculturality promotes a deeper understanding of the complexities involved

in cross-cultural interactions and the importance of adaptability and empathy in promoting meaningful connections (Baker 2022:22-23).

Empathy is a crucial element in intercultural education, as it facilitates understanding and acceptance of cultural differences (Huber, 2012:36). It requires individuals to "venture into the world of others" and view experiences from within their socio-cultural contexts (Huber, 2012:36). Empathy in intercultural competence encompasses both cognitive and affective aspects, helping individuals to navigate and appreciate the "otherness of others" by bridging gaps in understanding and fostering acceptance (Huber, 2012:36). This skill is essential for negotiating identity and relationships in multicultural settings, as it involves stepping outside one's own frame of reference (Huber, 2012:36).

1.1.4 Intercultural Communication and Identity

Intercultural communication has been extensively examined in connection with identity, which can be defined as an individual's subjective sense of self and their relation to the world (Kang 2022: 1-2). Another important aspect of identity is its relationship with language. As Yadav (2024: 1) states, "language is widely regarded as a fundamental driver in shaping and evolving one's sense of identity, especially in settings where multiple languages are used". Kang (2022:1-2) continues, "identity poses several challenges": firstly, individuals often lack of competence to interpret perspectives from different cultures, leading to misunderstandings and miscommunication (Kang 2022: 1-2). Secondly, power dynamics between interlocutors can create imbalances, where one party's identity and voice may be marginalized (Kang 2022: 1-2). Lastly, the variability and fluidity of identity, which changes depending on context and interaction, add another layer of complexity to intercultural exchanges (Kang 2022: 1-2). These aspects highlight the need for increased cultural competence, awareness of power structures, and adaptability in navigating the intricate landscape of intercultural communication (Kang 2022: 1-2).

1.2 Cultures and Stereotypes

From an intercultural perspective, cultures are seen as heterogeneous, containing a great deal of variety among its members with boundaries that are fluid, dynamic, and blurred (Baker 2022:22). Baker (2022:22) continues by stating that this view recognizes that within any given culture, there exists a wide array of beliefs, practices, and values that are constantly evolving and influenced by internal and external interactions. Another important aspect to consider when dealing with culture is that cultures play a pivotal role in intercultural communication, shaping the ways in which individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to messages (Daley 2023). Cultures encompass the shared beliefs, values, norms, and practices of a group, influencing communication styles, behaviours, and the meanings attributed to various interactions (Daley 2023). Effective intercultural communication requires an understanding and appreciation of cultural differences, which can include variations in verbal and non-verbal communication, contexts and etiquette (Daley 2023). By recognizing these cultural distinctions, individuals can navigate cross-cultural interactions more effectively, fostering mutual respect and reducing the potential for misunderstandings (Daley 2023).

Hall (1966 in Baker 2022) describes culture through the metaphor of an iceberg that contains all the aspects of a given culture. The metaphor highlights that much of our culture is out of our awareness or unconscious, just as the majority of the iceberg is under the water and invisible from the surface (Baker 2022). The dynamic nature of cultures necessitates a flexible and empathetic approach to intercultural communication, where recognizing and respecting diversity within cultural groups is of greatest importance (Baker 2022:22), especially given that stereotypes are deeply ingrained societal beliefs or assumptions about particular groups of people based on shared characteristics (Bennet 1998:4). Stereotypes are preconceived and often oversimplified beliefs about groups of people, typically based on characteristics such as appearance, behaviour, or cultural background (Huber 2012:27). These beliefs, which can be rooted in historical, social, or institutional contexts, are resistant to change because they are emotionally charged and rarely influenced by rational arguments (Huber 2012:27). While they might sometimes stem from observations or experiences, stereotypes are problematic because they may give us a false sense of understanding our communication partners (Bennet 1998:4).

Stereotypes are formed through various influences, including family, social groups, media, and personal experiences, and they often persist independently of personal interactions with the stereotyped groups (Huber 2012:27-28). Intercultural education must, therefore, address these preformed stereotypes rather than assume a neutral starting point (Huber 2012:28). Rather than dismissing stereotypes as inherently negative, they should be discussed openly in a safe environment, fostering mutual understanding and empathy (Huber 2012:29). This approach encourages learners to recognize their own biases and work towards developing intercultural competence, which is essential in navigating diverse societal interactions (Huber 2012:29).

1.3 The role of dialogue and its relationship with Intercultural Communicative Competence

Byram (1997) defines dialogue as “the act of engaging in direct interaction where cultural differences are discussed and negotiated in order to foster empathy and intercultural understanding”. Effective intercultural communication through dialogue involves a process of reciprocity, where individuals actively listen to and engage with different cultural viewpoints (Guth and Helm 2010). Through this interaction, participants become co-creators of knowledge, moving beyond passive observation to active participation (Guth & Helm, 2010).

Moreover, dialogue promotes Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), which Byram (1997) defines as the ability to negotiate and manage meaning in intercultural encounters. ICC is a crucial skill developed through telecollaborative practices that integrate language learning and intercultural exchange (Guth & Helm, 2010). In a telecollaborative context, students are not only tasked with using a foreign language but also with understanding and interpreting cultural cues, values, and communication norms (Guth & Helm, 2010). Guth and Helm (2010) emphasize that developing ICC requires both language proficiency and intercultural awareness, where learners must reflect on their own cultural assumptions while gaining empathy and respect for other perspectives. Additionally, Guth and Helm (2010) argue that ICC is not just a cognitive skill but also involves emotional and attitudinal shifts, as learners become more open, adaptable, and reflective through these intercultural encounters. Through sustained dialogue, individuals

are exposed to different perspectives, helping them to recognize and challenge their own stereotypes and biases (Helm, 2015). Moreover, dialogue encourages participants to approach cultural differences with empathy, which entails understanding the thoughts, emotions, and viewpoints of others within their specific cultural contexts (Guth & Helm, 2010).

1.4 Virtual Exchange

Virtual Exchange refers to a range of pedagogical practices that use online communication to bring together students from different cultural backgrounds to interact and collaborate (Finardi and Aşık 2024). O’Dowd (2017:8) states that virtual exchange denotes the strategic utilization of digital communication technologies to facilitate interaction among cohorts of learners situated in geographically disparate regions. This educational approach aims to enhance foreign language proficiency, digital literacy, and intercultural competence (O’Dowd 2017:8). Through virtual exchange programs, participants can develop intercultural competence, gain a deeper understanding of global issues, and foster mutual respect and empathy (O’Dowd 2021:10). Thus, virtual mobility serves as a powerful tool for promoting intercultural dialogue, breaking down cultural barriers, and building bridges between people from different parts of the world (O’Dowd 2021). By engaging in collaborative online activities and project-based learning, participants can develop critical skills that are essential in a globalized world (O’Dowd 2017:8). Finardi and Asik (2024) state that Virtual Exchange promotes intercultural dialogue, understanding, and the development of digital skills, providing an alternative to traditional physical mobility programs in higher education. As O’Dowd (2021: 4) affirms “virtual mobility plays a crucial role in enhancing intercultural communication by providing individuals with opportunities to interact with people from diverse cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds”.

1.4.1 Benefits of Virtual Exchange

Virtual exchange offers a powerful pedagogical approach that fosters intercultural communicative competence, intercultural learning, and critical cultural awareness (Waldman et al., 2023:100). By facilitating interactions between students from diverse cultural backgrounds, virtual exchange helps participants develop essential qualities for effective intercultural communication, including respect, openness, curiosity, and active listening (Waldman et al., 2023:100). Moreover, virtual exchange not only enhances language proficiency but also integrates international and intercultural dimensions into the curriculum without the need for physical mobility (Finardi and Aşık, 2024:2). This makes virtual exchange an accessible and inclusive tool for broadening students' global perspectives. By connecting learners across geographical and cultural divides, virtual exchange fosters global citizenship, cultivating an understanding of and empathy for global challenges while promoting a sense of shared responsibility and a commitment to addressing those challenges (Finardi and Aşık, 2024:2). Additionally, the integration of collaborative online activities, both synchronous and asynchronous, into the learning process provides students with rich, immersive experiences that deepen their understanding of diverse perspectives (O'Dowd, 2017:8). Through these digital platforms, students develop foreign language proficiency and enhance their digital literacy and intercultural competence, essential skills in today's interconnected world (O'Dowd, 2017:14).

1.4.2 Virtual and Physical Mobility

Virtual exchanges are increasingly recognized as a valuable means of gaining international experience and serve as a viable alternative to traditional physical mobility (Evolve, 2020:42). The accessibility and convenience of virtual exchanges allow participants to connect with peers abroad without the financial or logistical challenges of travel, thus broadening opportunities for global engagement (Evolve, 2020:42). This form of exchange creates a more inclusive space, providing access to students who may not have the means to participate in physical exchange programs (Finardi & Aşık, 2024:2).

While virtual and physical exchanges offer distinct experiences, each has unique benefits. Physical exchanges typically provide extended immersion in another culture, enabling language learning in a variety of communicative contexts, often without the immediate support of a tutor (O'Dowd, 2021:5). In contrast, virtual exchanges tend to involve shorter, more intensive class-to-class collaborations, where participants engage in focused, structured activities that facilitate intercultural communication and language practice (O'Dowd, 2021:5). Though less immersive in terms of physical environment, virtual exchanges still offer profound intercultural learning opportunities by enabling meaningful interactions across cultural boundaries, often from the comfort of one's own home or institution (O'Dowd, 2021:9).

Furthermore, virtual mobility, which relies on digital platforms to facilitate international interactions and learning experiences, offers a unique opportunity to transcend geographical limitations and connect individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (O'Dowd, 2021). By integrating virtual exchanges into the curriculum, students can engage in global initiatives, participate in international projects, and collaborate with peers worldwide, all without the need to physically relocate (O'Dowd, 2017:14). This innovative approach to international education helps learners develop intercultural competence, digital literacy, and global awareness, all of which are critical for navigating an interconnected world (Guth & Helm, 2010). As virtual mobility continues to evolve, it promises to complement traditional mobility programs, offering accessible, flexible, and enriching experiences that prepare students for the demands of a globalized society (Helm, 2015).

1.5 The Role of Web 2.0 Technologies in Enhancing Telecollaborative Learning and Intercultural Communication

Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs, wikis, and social media platforms, can be effectively integrated into telecollaborative learning environments to enhance both intercultural communication and language learning (Guth & Helm, 2010). These technologies offer dynamic, interactive tools that promote collaboration and real-time communication between learners across different cultural contexts (O'Dowd, 2017). By using blogs, for example, students can share reflective posts about cultural topics, respond to their peers'

perspectives, and engage in meaningful discussions that extend beyond traditional classroom interactions (Guth & Helm, 2010). Wikis, as collaborative platforms, allow students to work together on shared projects, co-creating content and contributing their diverse viewpoints, thus fostering deeper intercultural understanding (Guth & Helm, 2010).

Social media, with its emphasis on user-generated content and real-time engagement, provides opportunities for learners to communicate more informally, exchange ideas, and even navigate cultural nuances in more spontaneous and authentic ways (Guth & Helm, 2010). Through these digital tools, students are not only practicing language skills in context but are also developing critical digital literacies, such as navigating online platforms, managing virtual communication, and understanding the etiquette of intercultural exchanges (O'Dowd, 2021).

Cheng et. al (2024) state that digital technologies, such as WhatsApp, play an important role in international student communication and identity formation. Similarly, the 2020 Steven's Initiative report noted the benefits of incorporating asynchronous activities into virtual exchanges, which are less demanding for students, while synchronous videoconferencing remained indispensable for socializing and relationship-building, despite being technologically vulnerable (O'Dowd, 2021:13). Asynchronous tools such as discussion boards and blogs offer flexibility, giving participants more time to reflect on cultural differences and articulate their thoughts (O'Dowd, 2021; Helm, 2015), whereas synchronous communication fosters immediate interpersonal connections, supporting deeper relationships across cultural boundaries.

CHAPTER 2

Analysis of Student Diaries and Reflective Papers from the Soliya Connect Program

The following chapter presents an analysis of diaries and reflective papers collected from University of Padua students participating in the Soliya Connect Program in the 2021-2022 academic year. I will begin by explaining what the Soliya Connect Program is and how the Padova exchange is organized. Then I will proceed by illustrating the source of my data, that is students' diaries and reflective papers. The focus of my analysis will be on different themes that emerged during the program such as anxiety, sadness, language barriers and how they evolved throughout the whole program.

2.1 Soliya Connect Program

The Soliya Connect Program is an innovative virtual exchange initiative aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue and enhancing mutual understanding among university students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and geographical backgrounds. As Hauck and Satar (2020) state, the Soliya Connect Program shows the importance of virtual mobility for the development of intercultural skills. In the digital environment, students are forced to rely more on verbal communication and careful listening, compensating for the lack of non-verbal cues that are present in face-to-face exchanges (Hauck & Satar, 2020). The Soliya Connect program exemplifies the potential of Virtual Exchange to facilitate meaningful intercultural dialogue and critical thinking, by bringing together students from the West and the Muslim world to engage in structured, facilitator-led discussions on socio-political issues (O'Dowd 2017).

This program consists of a platform where students can connect through video conferencing, engaging in facilitated, small-group discussions to explore global issues, share their personal stories, and reflect on the cultural differences that shape their worldviews. By providing a space for meaningful interaction, Soliya encourages participants to confront their own biases, question assumptions, and build bridges across cultures. As Helm (2020) emphasizes, "Soliya encourages students to experience cross-cultural interaction without the need for physical travel, expanding access to intercultural

exchange in an increasingly digital world”. This makes the program accessible to students who may not have the resources or opportunities for traditional study abroad experiences, democratizing intercultural exchange.

2.1.1 The Padova Exchange

In the second semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, the Soliya Connect Program at the University of Padua involved 13 students, who were each placed in international groups of at least 10 students from different parts of the world. Over the course of eight weeks, these students participated in a weekly two-hour video conference through the Soliya platform, where they engaged in discussions on topics such as politics and cultural differences. Each week, after the meeting, students were required to write a diary about the session, describing their emotions, what went well, what could have been improved, and what they learned. These diaries were then uploaded on to the university's Moodle platform, where they could be viewed by other students, participating in the project, from the University of Padua. At the end of the program, participants had to write a final reflective paper based on the whole experience, using the diaries as a guide to understand if and how their perceptions had shifted.

As a form of virtual mobility, the Soliya Connect Program provides students with the opportunity to engage in meaningful cross-cultural exchanges without the need for physical travel, a significant advantage in today’s increasingly digital and interconnected world. The Padova exchange allows students to follow the meetings from home or university providing a flexible alternative for students who can not participate in physical mobility. This allows students to broaden their horizons and interact with peers from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds without the financial, logistical, or time-related constraints often associated with physical travel (Evolve, 2020). O'Dowd (2018) highlights that these programs can eliminate many barriers that prevent students from participating in study abroad, such as financial limitations or geographical distance, while still delivering rich opportunities for personal and academic growth. Furthermore, Soliya’s model underlines the increasing importance of telecollaboration and virtual exchange in the context of higher education. Through the use of digital platforms, students are able to participate in global learning experiences that transcend traditional borders,

engaging in real-time discussions and collaborations with international peers. As Helm and van der Velden (2019) note, this shift toward virtual exchange represents a growing trend in higher education, where institutions recognize the need to integrate digital tools that facilitate global communication, cultural understanding, and collaborative learning in a way that reflects the realities of a digitally-driven global economy. By expanding access to intercultural exchanges, Soliya and similar programs play a crucial role in preparing students for a world where cross-cultural communication and digital literacy are essential skills.

2.1.2 The relationship that exists between the Soliya Connect Program, Intercultural Communication and Mediation

At the core of the Soliya Connect Program lies the concept of intercultural communication, which Baker (2022) defines as “the process of exchanging ideas, information, and emotions across cultural boundaries”. This is a foundational element of the program, as students from diverse backgrounds are encouraged to engage in meaningful conversations that require them to navigate linguistic barriers, varied communication styles, and differing cultural values.

The moderated environment provided by Soliya allows participants to explore these challenges within a safe and supportive space, which is critical for fostering openness and understanding. Therefore, it is important to consider that a key aspect of a virtual program, such as Soliya Connect Program, is mediation, defined as the ability to act as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other directly, usually speakers of different languages (Byram et al., 2017). The presence of a structured environment is key in mitigating potential communication breakdowns or conflicts, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics that touch on deeply ingrained cultural values or beliefs (Helm, 2020). Cultural intermediary roles, Byram, Golubeva, Hui and Wagner (2017) continue, would include the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other and the capacity to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations. Over time, students develop greater cultural sensitivity and adaptability, learning to navigate not only language

differences but also the subtleties of intercultural communication, such as varying norms around politeness, directness, or conflict resolution (Jackson, 2014).

Having said that, it is crucial to introduce the role of the facilitator in the Padova Exchange. The role of the facilitator is crucial, with his contribution to the program, the online sessions allow students to feel safe and heard when sharing their opinions and thoughts. O'Dowd (2017:19) believes that the most distinctive of the Soliya's characteristics is undoubtedly the role of the facilitator who takes part in all the online sessions and whose role it is to create a safe dialogic space for learning and to ensure that the dialogue process is constructive and meaningful. The facilitator, usually during the first sessions, where students have to know each other, breaks the ice by posing a question or introducing a new topic to make it easier for students to engage. There are often moments of silence during the sessions, and in these instances, the facilitator may step in to encourage students to continue the discussion or guide them toward a new conversation.

By creating a more comfortable environment and providing support, when necessary, the facilitator helps participants feel more at ease in sharing their thoughts and ideas. In the Soliya Connect Program, the initial stages of this process where students do not know each other, can be particularly challenging, as they are confronted with their own cultural assumptions. These assumptions, often deeply ingrained, can shape how they interpret and respond to the perspectives of their peers, creating a unique set of obstacles in communication (Baker, 2022). However, through continuous interaction and reflection, students gradually learn to recognize and overcome these barriers, developing a deeper understanding of both themselves and the diverse individuals they engage with.

2.2 Methodology for Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, a thematic analysis was carried out in order to examine the qualitative data collected from student diaries and reflective papers. This method involves identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within the data. The diaries and reflective papers, written by 13 students over an 8-week period, were organized by student and week. The analysis began by reading through the texts multiple times to become familiar with the content. Key themes were then coded and categorized based on their frequency and relevance.

Thematic analysis allows for the identification of recurring patterns in student experiences and insights, particularly focusing on how their thoughts and perspectives evolved throughout the project.

Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the number of students participating in the study, the total number of diaries written by each student, and the average word count per diary. It lists 13 students, each identified with a unique number, and shows the corresponding number of diaries they submitted over the 8-week project period. Additionally, the table includes the average number of words written per diary for each student, highlighting variations in student engagement and depth of reflection. This information allows for a clearer understanding of individual contributions and helps identify patterns in how students approached their diary entries throughout the project.

Table 1 Students’ Diaries and Average Word Count Overview

| Students | Number of diaries | Average words per diary |
|----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Student 1 | 8 | 581 |
| Student 2 | 8 | 283 |
| Student 3 | 8 | 318 |
| Student 4 | 8 | 265 |
| Student 5 | 8 | 198 |
| Student 6 | 8 | 252 |
| Student 7 | 8 | 271 |
| Student 8 | 8 | 301 |
| Student 9 | 8 | 216 |
| Student 10 | 8 | 206 |
| Student 11 | 8 | 238 |
| Student 12 | 8 | 264 |
| Student 13 | 8 | 457 |
| Total diaries | 104 | |

Table 2 presents data on the number of students, the total reflective papers written by each student, and the average word count per paper. It includes information from 13 students, indicating how many reflective papers each contributed throughout the project. Additionally, the table provides the average number of words per reflective paper for each

student, offering insights into the extent and depth of their reflections. This allows for a comparative understanding of student engagement, as variations in the number and length of the papers highlight different levels of involvement in the reflective writing process.

Table 2 Students Reflective Papers and Average Word Count Overview

| Students | Number of Reflective Papers | Number of words per reflective paper |
|---|------------------------------------|---|
| Student 1 | 1 | 821 |
| Student 2 | 1 | 717 |
| Student 3 | 1 | 741 |
| Student 4 | 1 | 703 |
| Student 5 | 1 | 735 |
| Student 6 | 1 | 737 |
| Student 7 | 1 | 741 |
| Student 8 | 1 | 665 |
| Student 9 | 1 | 797 |
| Student 10 | 1 | 732 |
| Student 11 | 1 | 708 |
| Student 12 | 1 | 747 |
| Student 13 | 1 | 814 |
| Total reflective papers | 13 | |
| Average words per reflective paper | | 742 |

The use of student diaries and reflective papers as data sources is particularly relevant in this context because they provide authentic, first-person accounts of participants' thoughts, emotions, and challenges as they navigated the complexities of intercultural communication in a virtual setting. Such reflective writing allows students to not only describe their experiences but also to engage in deeper metacognitive reflection, offering insights into their cognitive and emotional processes (Boud et al., 2013).

To begin the analysis of the diaries and reflective papers, I first created a folder for each student, organizing both their diaries and reflective papers within these individual folders. I started the analysis with the diaries, carefully reading each one to identify recurring patterns and key insights. During this process, I highlighted the most common themes that emerged from the students' reflections and, after completing the initial review, I compiled a list of all identified themes. This systematic approach allowed for a clear understanding of the main topics addressed by the students throughout the project.

In terms of data collection, the reflective papers and diaries were gathered from a group of 13 of students from the University of Padua, representing a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. This diversity provided a rich dataset for exploring how participants from different contexts experienced and interpreted intercultural communication and dialogue.

Overall, this qualitative approach, centered on the thematic analysis of students' diaries and reflective papers, provides a comprehensive method for exploring the impact of the Soliya Connect Program on participants' intercultural communication skills. By capturing the students' reflections over time, this methodology offers a significant understanding of how individuals experience and adapt to virtual intercultural exchanges, shedding light on the complexities of language, culture, and communication in a digitally-mediated global context.

2.3 Analysis of Diaries

The analysis of the diaries consisted of a careful reading of every student's diary with the aim of highlighting the most common themes that emerged over the course of the whole program. In order to have a clear idea of what the students wrote, a Word document was created in order to list all the recurring themes week by week. The diaries consist of reflections written by students shortly after the end of every session, in order to keep noted what happened during each session and how they behaved in a multicultural and mediated context. Moreover, the diaries serve as a valuable tool for writing the final reflective paper based on the whole experience.

Table 3 presents weekly data on recurring themes as anxiety, sadness, and language barriers, collected across eight weeks, alongside the total number of diaries submitted each week. Anxiety scores show a marked decrease over time, starting at a high of 7 in Week 1 and dropping to 0 by Week 3 and Week 4. Sadness remains consistently low, with no instances reported after Week 1. Similarly, language barriers show a notable decline from 9 in Week 1 to just 1 in Week 3, though a slight increase to 2 is observed in Week 4. The number of total diaries remains constant at 13 across all weeks. These results indicate

an overall reduction in emotional distress and language difficulties over time, possibly reflecting adaptation or coping mechanisms emerging throughout the study period. The consistent number of diaries also suggests stable participant engagement, enhancing the reliability of the findings.

Table 3 Recurring themes on students' diaries

| Week | Anxiety | Sadness | Language barriers | Total diaries |
|--------|---------|---------|-------------------|---------------|
| Week 1 | 7 | 0 | 9 | 13 |
| Week 2 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 13 |
| Week 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 13 |
| Week 4 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 13 |
| Week 5 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 13 |
| Week 6 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 13 |
| Week 7 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 13 |
| Week 8 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 13 |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

2.3.1 Anxiety

In order to understand the results provided by the table, I want to dig deeper into what emerged from the diaries, related to anxiety, and reflect on what students wrote. For a clear and specific analysis, I created a word document containing some students' reflections that show their concerns and fears. The document provides a detailed reflection on anxieties and uncertainties faced by students during the early stages of their virtual exchange experience, highlighting their emotional and psychological struggles.

In the first week, a slightly majority of students (53.85%) expressed concerns about their ability to communicate effectively, particularly due to language barriers or fear of offending others. One student shared, "My fear was to sound offensive or disrespectful. I was afraid that something I said could be outrageous for others, and this sensation kind of blocked me from thinking clearly" (Student 1 – Week 1). This fear of being misunderstood or saying the wrong thing was common, with another student stating a similar feeling: "During the first Zoom session, I felt quite nervous because I feared that

I could say something that might sound as offensive for the other participants of the meeting” (Student 12 – week 1).

Language was a significant source of anxiety for some. For example, one student worried that their English skills might not be sufficient to express themselves clearly: “I was very anxious because I thought I wouldn’t be able to express myself clearly due to my English level, but once I started talking with my groupmates, they got everything I shared and gave me positive feedback” (Student 3 – week 1). This acknowledgment of positive feedback from peers helped alleviate some of the initial worries, but the fear of being unable to connect remained a major concern in the early stages of the exchange.

Silence and awkwardness during group sessions were also frequent sources of discomfort. As one student put it, “I was afraid no one would talk and that we would stay in silence for the whole session, but it wasn’t the case” (Student 7 – week 1). Another student shared that although they are generally extroverted, the newness of the situation made them feel particularly nervous: “I have to say that even if I am an extrovert person, I felt very nervous during the whole conference” (Student 11 – week 1).

A minority of students (28.57%) worried about their preparedness and the adequacy of their skills. One student stated, “The days before my first meeting, I felt very nervous because I thought that I did not own enough skills and information” (Student 12), pointing to the pressure some felt to meet their own expectations or those of their peers. This theme of self-doubt is echoed in another reflection: “I was afraid of my own expectations not being met” (Student 13), indicating how personal fears about performance played a role in their overall experience.

2.3.2 Sadness

Students in the Soliya Connect Program experience an emotional evolution, moving from casual participants to deeply connected friends over the course of the program. Initially, the sessions lack strong personal sentiments, but by the program's final stages, students feel a profound sense of sadness and nostalgia as they approach their last meetings.

In the final weeks, participants express a commitment to keeping in touch, reflecting on how the program fostered connections across cultural boundaries. Through their reflections, it becomes evident that the program transformed not only their understanding of one another but also their sense of global community. In the seventh week, as the last session approached, students began to express disbelief at how quickly time had passed and sorrow over the program's end. One student shared, "I feel so sad thinking that the next session will be our last one. I'd never thought that time could go by so fast, things could change so rapidly, and I could make friends coming from all over the world" (Student 1, Week 7). This sentiment was echoed by others, with Student 13 reflecting, "We were all pretty disappointed with how time flies because we realized how much we were enjoying the sessions and also, how much we are going to miss them" (Student 13, Week 7). Another student summed up the general mood, saying, "I am kind of sad we are going to have our last lesson" (Student 9, Week 7), which emphasizes the growing emotional attachment to the group.

In the eighth and final week, as the program officially concluded, feelings of sadness became even more pronounced. Most students (61%) expressed profound emotions, with Student 1 stating, "My Soliya Connect Program has come to an end, and I am extremely sad" (Student 1, Week 8). Similarly, Student 4 described a powerful emotional reaction, noting, "My eyes were filled with tears of both joy and sadness" (Student 4, Week 8), indicating a mix of happiness for the meaningful experiences and sadness for the program to end. The group of students created a strong relationship across the whole program, as seen in Student 12's words, "We were all quite sad that this was our last session together" (Student 12, Week 8), which expresses the group's shared sentiment.

In a final effort to preserve their connections, approximately 31% of students exchanged social media information, hoping to stay in touch even after the program's conclusion. Student 7 shared, "At the end, we said our goodbyes; it was really sad. We exchanged our social media accounts" (Student 7, Week 8), while Student 8 echoed this hope, saying, "It was so sad. But I hope that me and my mates will keep in contact on Instagram!" (Student 8, Week 8). Likewise, Student 9 voiced a similar intention, "I am kinda sad this project finished, but we already exchanged numbers and contacts, and we are definitely going to keep in touch" (Student 9, Week 8). The desire to stay connected, as noted by another student who described feeling "a little sad and already nostalgic," reflects how the experience transcended its initial academic purpose, transforming into a space of genuine friendships and personal growth.

2.3.3 Language Barriers

This analysis offers an in-depth view of students' encounters with language barriers in an intercultural exchange program, highlighting both their early struggles and later achievements. In the diary entries from the first weeks, students frequently expressed anxiety about their English skills, fearing that accents, pronunciation, or limited practice might impede clear communication. For instance, one student shared, "Another fear of mine was that of others not understanding what I was saying because of my English. I am not very confident with my accent and pronunciation" (Student 1, Week 1). Another voiced similar concerns, saying, "I was very anxious because I thought I wouldn't be able to express myself clearly due to my English level, but once I started talking with my groupmates, they got everything I shared and gave me positive feedback" (Student 3, Week 1). Student 7 expressed difficulty due to lack of regular practice, saying, "I wasn't confident enough because I don't have friends who speak English, so I have no one to practice with on a daily basis, and I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to communicate properly" (Student 7, Week 1).

By the second week, however, students began noticing improvements in their comfort levels. Student 11, for instance, commented, "This time I definitely felt more confident interacting with the other participants" (Student 11, Week 2), and Student 8 remarked, "This session was way better than the first one because we all felt more confident and we

shared a lot of experiences” (Student 8, Week 2). By the third week, a shift in confidence was evident, as Student 1 wrote, “I feel more relaxed when I have to express my opinion and I know that everybody will be very understanding and will try to see my point of view” (Student 1, Week 3). These entries indicate a gradual increase in students’ comfort with both the language and the intercultural exchange setting. By week six, Student 5 highlighted this progression, saying, “This session was very fun and, as always, it gave me the possibility to learn more, be more confident with the language” (Student 5, Week 6).

2.4 Analysis of Reflective Papers

The analysis of the reflective papers consisted of a careful reading of every student’s paper with the aim to highlight the most common theme that emerged over the course of the whole program. In order to have a clear idea of what the students wrote, a Word document was created in order to list all the recurring themes.

Table 4 Recurring themes on students' papers

| Student | Anxiety | Language barriers | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|--|
| Student 1 | YES | YES | |
| Student 2 | NO | NO | |
| Student 3 | YES | YES | |
| Student 4 | YES | NO | |
| Student 5 | NO | YES | |
| Student 6 | NO | NO | |
| Student 7 | YES | YES | |
| Student 8 | YES | YES | |
| Student 9 | NO | NO | |
| Student 10 | NO | NO | |
| Student 11 | NO | NO | |
| Student 12 | YES | YES | |
| Student 13 | NO | NO | |
| Total reflective papers | 13 | 13 | |

2.4.1 Language barriers

In the reflective papers, students looked back on their journeys with an appreciation for the skills and confidence they gained. One student struggled with speaking English in front of others, fearing judgment or misunderstanding writing, “I always stutter when speaking to someone whose first language is English for fear of being judged, but this first experience showed me that nobody is there to judge my speaking skills” (Student 13, Reflective Paper). Student 3 reflected, “I also faced some difficulties when some of my peers were talking because their pronunciation was hard to understand due to their cultural context, but I simply asked them to explain themselves better” (Student 3, Reflective Paper).

The program also fostered critical communication skills, as one student noted: “I improved my skills and abilities, the way in which my mind was used to process thoughts and I achieved the ability to adjust them when I had to talk with someone from a different country” (Student 5, Reflective Paper). Two students felt the program helped them overcome deep-rooted language anxieties: “My biggest fear was to not be able to express myself as I would have wanted to because of the language barrier, and mostly because even though I understand English extremely well, I was never able to use the language because none of my friends speak it” (Student 7, Reflective Paper). Similarly, Student 5 shared how the experience reshaped their self-image: “I started this beautiful trip as a shy girl, who was scared to share any opinion, but this intercultural exchange changed me, and I am now more confident about my English and about my abilities” (Student 5, Reflective Paper).

2.4.2 Anxiety

As students moved through the Soliya Connect Program, many experienced a transformative shift from initial apprehension to genuine confidence and comfort within the group. As the weeks progressed, many students noted that their initial anxieties began to fade, replaced by a growing sense of confidence and ease in the group. For instance, Student 7 reflected on their personal growth, saying, “I started this journey very anxious, my biggest fear was to not be able to express myself. But once the first few interactions had passed, I was starting to feel more confident in myself and my skills.” Similarly, Student 8 remarked on the initial discomfort but also acknowledged the positive shift in

group dynamics: “At the beginning, I was terrorized: I was scared of saying or doing things that my groupmates would misunderstand, but as the meetings proceeded, we started to get more comfortable and confident.”

By the end of the experience, the students generally felt more self-assured and motivated. As Student 4 noted, “This experience overall inspired me to push myself even further, continue studying and follow my passion for writing and learning languages, with less anxiety and more self-awareness.” The reflective papers reveal a common theme of personal growth, where students overcame their fears and developed a deeper sense of self-confidence. Even those who initially struggled with intense anxiety recognized the importance of stepping out of their comfort zones and embracing the challenges of communication and collaboration in a multicultural environment.

CHAPTER 3

Final Reflections on Intercultural Communication in Virtual Collaboration

The aim of this final chapter is to reflect on the key findings of this research, which attempted to answer two central questions: “How does intercultural communication within a virtual setting influence the attainment of communicative objectives?” and “How do students’ perceptions of virtual collaborative experiences evolve across diverse national contexts over time?” Using the Soliya Connect Program as a case study, this research explored the dynamics of intercultural communication and virtual collaboration, drawing on students' personal experiences documented in their diaries and reflective papers.

Through the analysis of these reflections, this chapter focuses on the challenges encountered by participants such as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings and initial communication anxieties, and highlights the strategies they adopted to overcome these obstacles. In addition, the chapter examines how students' perceptions of intercultural interaction transformed over the course of the program, moving from initial apprehension to increased confidence, cultural sensitivity and communicative competence. By going back to these research questions, this chapter aims to provide a reflection on how virtual intercultural exchanges, such as the Soliya Connect Program, may contribute to the development of communication skills and global awareness.

3.1 Analysis of Results

3.1.1 Anxiety reduction and comfort with language

The initial challenge identified in Chapter 2 was student anxiety, as shown in Table 3, where approximately 53.85% of students reported apprehension about their ability to engage effectively in an intercultural context. The anxiety originated from several sources, including fears around language proficiency, perceived communication barriers, and concerns about unintentionally causing offense.

This initial tension is illustrated in the reflections of Student 1, who expressed a strong fear of inadvertently offending others: “My fear was to sound offensive or disrespectful. I was afraid that something I said could be outrageous for others, and this sensation kind of blocked me from thinking clearly.” For many students, the uncertainty about how their words might be interpreted added to their anxiety, creating a barrier that impeded open communication.

Similarly, Student 3’s comment about language proficiency adds another layer to the issue: “I was very anxious because I thought I wouldn’t be able to express myself clearly due to my English level.” This reflection highlights how language concerns were a significant contributor to early anxiety, as students worried about their ability to communicate their ideas accurately and be understood by their peers. Language anxiety in this context can be understood not only as a fear of mispronunciation or grammatical errors but also as a deeper concern about failing to communicate complex emotions and perspectives in a second language. This echoes findings in intercultural communication research, which suggest that non-native speakers often experience heightened anxiety when attempting to articulate their thoughts in a foreign language, fearing that their limited proficiency may lead to misinterpretation (Jackson, 2014).

In addition to language concerns, the virtual format of the program itself may have contributed to students’ initial anxiety. In the early sessions, several students noted the discomfort of speaking in a group where most members were strangers. This issue is reflected in Student 7’s remark: “I was afraid no one would talk and that we would stay in silence for the whole session, but it wasn’t the case.” The student’s concern about prolonged silences points to a common issue in virtual settings, where moments of silence can be more frequent leading to awkwardness.

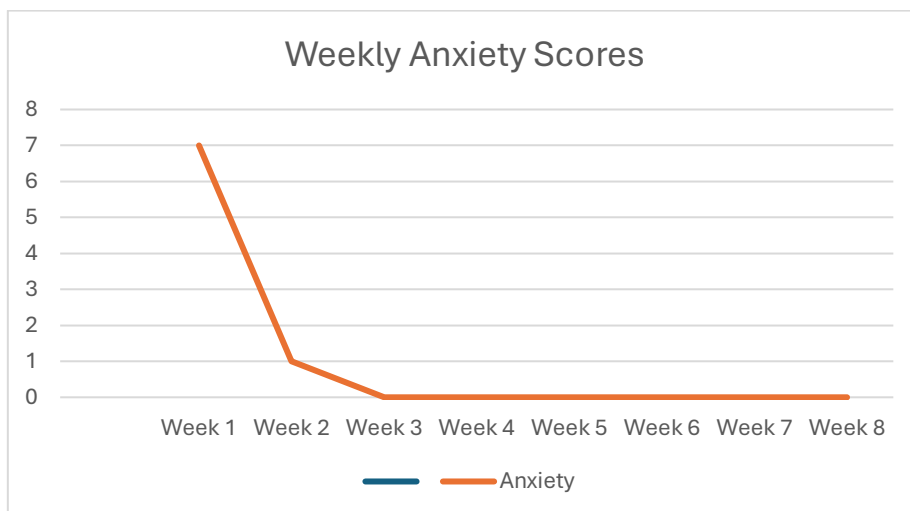
As the program progressed, however, Table 3 indicates a significant decrease in anxiety mentions, with a notable drop by Week 3, when reports of anxiety had completely disappeared. This trend suggests that students adapted to the intercultural context and virtual environment relatively quickly. Several factors likely contributed to this decrease in anxiety. First, the structured nature of the sessions, led by trained facilitators, provided

students with a consistent and safe space to express themselves, ask questions, and make mistakes without fear of judgment. This supportive context is crucial in intercultural communication, as it allows participants to build confidence.

The progressive reduction in anxiety also reflects the students' growing familiarity with both the program's format and their international peers. Over the first few sessions, many students reported receiving positive reinforcement from their group members, which helped to reduce initial fears. By Week 3, the absence of reported anxiety suggests that students had reached a point of comfort and confidence, where initial language and cultural concerns no longer posed significant barriers to engagement (Figure 1).

This evolution from anxiety to comfort highlights the transformative potential of well-structured virtual exchanges, where initial discomfort is mitigated through consistent support, structured facilitation, and a positive group dynamic. The Soliya Connect Program's success in reducing student anxiety illustrates how virtual exchanges, when thoughtfully designed, can provide an accessible platform for intercultural interaction, enabling students to overcome initial reservations and engage fully in meaningful dialogue.

Figure 1 Weekly Anxiety Scores



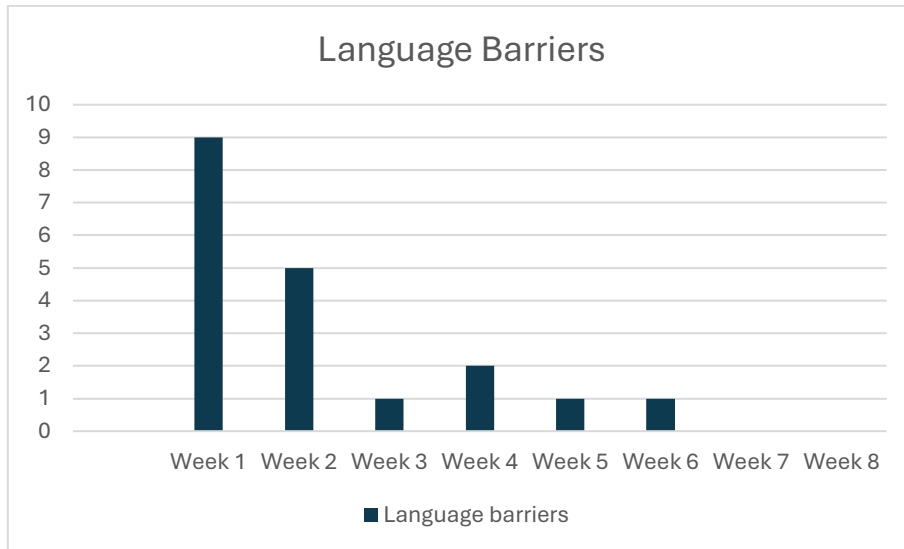
3.1.2 Language barriers and confidence gains

Language barriers posed another major challenge, particularly in Week 1, where 69.23% of students expressed concerns about communication. As Student 7 noted, “I wasn’t confident enough because I don’t have friends who speak English, so I have no one to practice with on a daily basis, and I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to communicate properly.” Student 1 echoed similar concerns, stating, “I am not very confident with my accent and pronunciation.”

However, by Week 3, mentions of language challenges had decreased significantly. Student 11 remarked in Week 2 that, “This time I definitely felt more confident interacting with the other participants,” indicating early signs of adaptation. By Week 6, students like Student 5 were not only more comfortable with English but reported a notable increase in language confidence: “This session was very fun and, as always, it gave me the possibility to learn more, be more confident with the language.”

Figure 2 shows how language barriers initially made communication difficult, with 9 reported instances in Week 1. However, by Week 3, only 1 student mentioned language challenges, suggesting that the structured environment and supportive peer interactions helped overcome these obstacles. Students’ early discomforts were gradually replaced by confidence in expressing themselves, as seen in Student 5’s Week 6 reflection: “I felt more confident with the language and with sharing my ideas”(Chapter 2).

Figure 2 Language Barriers



3.1.3 Interpersonal bonding and emotional attachment

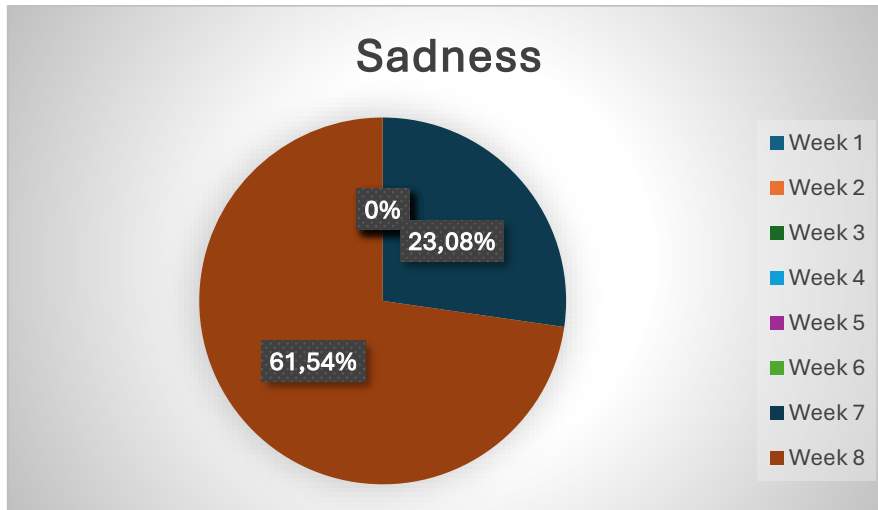
As the program progressed, students formed strong bonds with each other, with Week 7 reporting a high percentage of sadness as the program’s end approached. In Week 7, most students expressed disbelief at how quickly the time had passed, while many conveyed a sense of impending loss. Approximately 61% of students reported strong emotions related to ending the sessions and intended to stay connected with their group members beyond the program.

Chapter 2’s data also highlighted a significant emotional attachment among students by the program’s end. Initial reflections in the diaries indicated a professional and task-oriented approach, but by Week 7, many students expressed sadness about the program concluding. As illustrated by Student 1 in Week 7, “I feel so sad thinking that the next session will be our last one. I’d never thought that time could go by so fast, things could change so rapidly, and I could make friends coming from all over the world.” This sentiment was echoed by Student 13, who remarked, “We were all pretty disappointed with how time flies because we realized how much we were enjoying the sessions.”

Figure 3, showing the percentage of students expressing sadness in each week, illustrates how the emotional connection intensified over time, thus providing visual insight into

how the virtual space evolved into a meaningful social environment. The sentiment expressed in Week 8 reveals a transition from an academic focus to a more personal connection, reflecting how virtual mobility facilitated deeper social bonds.

Figure 3 Sadness



3.2 Discussion of Findings

3.2.1 The Role of the facilitator as a way to reduce anxiety

One of the key findings is the critical role of structured facilitation in reducing anxiety and fostering openness. The facilitator's role in the early sessions provided students with a sense of security, allowing them to gradually become used to the virtual format and intercultural setting. This aligns with theories in intercultural communication that emphasize guided interaction as a means to manage and alleviate cultural uncertainty (Croucher et al., 2015). By facilitating introductions and easing students into discussions, the program's structure helped to reduce initial fears, ultimately supporting students' transition from passive to active participants in intercultural dialogue.

The reduction in anxiety scores by Week 3 supports the idea that structured virtual programs with skilled facilitators can rapidly decrease emotional barriers. This is particularly relevant for future virtual mobility programs, as it suggests that such interventions can help students, even those initially apprehensive, find comfort in unfamiliar cultural and linguistic contexts.

3.2.2 Emotional attachment and the impact of Virtual Exchange (VE)

The expressions of sadness recorded in Weeks 7 and 8 in Chapter 2 demonstrate a significant emotional attachment among students by the end of the Soliya Connect Program. This attachment challenges the common assumption that virtual exchanges lack the emotional depth of face-to-face interactions. As Student 1 reflected in Week 7, “I feel so sad thinking that the next session will be our last one. I’d never thought that time could go by so fast, things could change so rapidly, and I could make friends coming from all over the world.” This statement encapsulates the surprise many students felt regarding the strength of the bonds they had formed, despite the digital nature of their interactions.

As the program came to an end in Week 8, this sadness became even more pronounced, with students describing mixed feelings of joy and nostalgia. Student 4 noted, “My eyes were filled with tears of both joy and sadness”. This reaction demonstrates how students came to value the connections they had made, which went beyond the initial academic goals and evolved into friendships between diverse cultures and backgrounds. Student 13 echoed this sentiment, reflecting, “We were all sad that we already reached the end of a beautiful experience,” showing the deep personal impact that the program had on its participants.

The steady growth of these emotional connections throughout the program suggests that virtual exchanges such as Soliya can provide participants with meaningful social and emotional benefits. Many students expressed a strong desire to stay in touch, illustrating the program's lasting impact on their personal lives. For instance, Student 9 shared, “I am kinda sad this project finished, but we already exchanged numbers and contacts, and we are definitely going to keep in touch with one another”. Similarly, Student 8 expressed optimism about future connections, stating, “It was so sad. But I hope that me and my mates will keep in contact on Instagram!”.

These findings highlight the potential of virtual mobility to complement traditional study abroad programs, offering students a unique opportunity to experience the emotional and social aspects of cultural exchange without geographical barriers. For many, the accessibility of virtual exchanges enabled connections that might have been financially

or logistically impossible in a traditional setting. The Soliya Connect Program, therefore, not only advanced students' academic and intercultural skills but also demonstrated that virtual exchanges can cultivate friendships, empathy and a sense of global citizenship. As Student 7 shared, “At the end we said our goodbyes, it was really sad, we exchanged our social media accounts,” stressing the participants' desire to maintain these connections and carry forward the global community they had built during the program.

3.2.3 Building Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

The Soliya Connect Program's emphasis on weekly reflections and structured intercultural interactions facilitated considerable growth in students' ICC. Chapter 1 outlines ICC as encompassing key skills in empathy, adaptability, and cultural navigation. The regularity of reflections allowed students to assess their experiences progressively, identifying challenges, and recognizing shifts in their understanding of cultural meanings. This structured, consistent self-reflection, paired with guided discussions, created an environment in which students could not only engage with new perspectives but also actively develop their ICC.

By Week 6, many students demonstrated this growth explicitly in their diaries and reflective papers. For instance, Student 7 noted feeling "more comfortable and open" with their group, describing a better sensation in participating in discussions and understanding others' cultural contexts. This shift from initial apprehension to open engagement illustrates the impact of repeated, positive intercultural experiences in enhancing cultural sensitivity and adaptability. The process of weekly reflection is likely to have contributed to this comfort level by encouraging students to monitor and adjust their own behaviours, thereby increasing their cultural awareness and responsiveness.

Moreover, the data presented in the tables in Chapter 2 highlight measurable changes in ICC-related themes such as empathy, confidence, and adaptability over time. Initially, students approached the sessions with hesitation, as noted in their early reflections. Language barriers, anxieties about offending others, and unfamiliarity with virtual exchange formats were among the concerns recorded. However, as students adapted, they expressed growing confidence in expressing themselves and actively listening to others.

The increase in reported empathy, specifically, demonstrates how students moved beyond understanding cultural differences on a surface level to a deeper, more personal connection with their peers. For example, by Week 6, students like Student 9 reflected on their evolving ability to "listen and understand" their peers' viewpoints, suggesting that the regular, guided exchanges helped them develop a more empathetic approach. This increase in empathy aligns with Byram's ICC model, which underscores the importance of curiosity and openness as foundational aspects of intercultural competence (Byram et al., 2017).

Similarly, the growth in adaptability is significant, as students learned to modify their communication styles and expectations to accommodate different cultural norms. Early concerns, such as Student 1's fear of unintentionally offending others, gradually diminished, replaced by confidence in navigating culturally sensitive discussions. This adaptability was also reflected in the way students managed language barriers; instead of viewing these as obstacles, they began to embrace language differences as opportunities for learning and mutual respect. By Week 6, language was no longer a primary concern for most participants, indicating a shift in mindset from rigid self-focus to an adaptable, inclusive approach toward communication.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore two primary research questions: “How does intercultural communication within a virtual setting influence the attainment of communicative objectives?” and “How do students’ perceptions of virtual collaborative experiences evolve across diverse national contexts over time?” The analysis of student diaries and reflective papers from the Soliya Connect Program reveals that virtual intercultural communication significantly influences students’ ability to achieve communicative objectives, while also facilitating a substantial evolution in their perceptions of collaborative online experiences.

The results from Chapter 2 indicate that intercultural communication within the Soliya Connect Program provides students with a structured, supportive platform that promotes their ability to meet communicative objectives. Early in the program, language barriers and anxiety posed initial challenges, impeding open dialogue and effective communication. However, as students engaged weekly in reflection and guided discussions, these barriers progressively vanished. The students’ reflections demonstrate that, over time, they developed critical communicative competencies, such as active listening, empathy, and adaptability, which are essential to intercultural dialogue.

These outcomes align with Byram’s model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), underscoring how regular, structured engagement in a virtual intercultural context fosters essential skills for achieving communicative objectives. By Week 6, students like Student 7 noted feeling “more comfortable and open,” reflecting a growing ability to interpret and respond to diverse perspectives with cultural sensitivity. Thus, the study’s findings suggest that virtual intercultural communication can effectively prepare students for collaborative, culturally complicated communication by fostering an adaptable, empathetic approach to dialogue, which enhances their capacity to meet communicative goals.

The second research question addressed how students' perceptions of virtual collaboration evolve over time across diverse national contexts. The results reveal a clear progression in students' perceptions, which shifted from initial apprehension to a deep sense of emotional attachment and intercultural empathy. Early reflections in student diaries reveal that students approached the virtual exchange with caution, expressing concerns about potential misunderstandings or offense. However, as the weeks passed, students developed greater confidence in both language and cultural interaction, appreciating the unique perspectives offered by their peers.

By the final weeks, the program's impact on students' perceptions was evident in their expressions of sadness and nostalgia at its conclusion, as many described an emotional attachment to their peers and a desire to maintain contact. This attachment challenges the assumption that virtual exchanges lack the depth of face-to-face interactions, highlighting instead how structured online collaboration can foster meaningful social bonds and a sense of global community. The willingness of students to stay connected through social media reflects the program's enduring impact, demonstrating that virtual exchanges not only provide academic and intercultural insights but also establish a foundation for long-term, cross-cultural relationships.

In conclusion, the study's findings indicate that virtual intercultural communication positively influences students' ability to meet communicative objectives by cultivating the skills necessary for culturally sensitive and effective dialogue. Additionally, students' perceptions of virtual collaboration evolved substantially, demonstrating that well-facilitated online exchanges can foster a strong sense of empathy and global connectedness. These insights affirm the relevance of virtual mobility as a valuable educational tool, offering students an accessible means to engage deeply with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, develop essential communicative competencies, and build meaningful connections that extend beyond the program's formal goal.

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SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

La seguente tesi esplora le dinamiche della comunicazione interculturale e lo sviluppo delle competenze comunicative in ambienti virtuali, utilizzando il progetto Soliya Connect Program come caso di studio. Attraverso un'analisi dei diari e dei saggi riflessivi scritti dagli studenti dell'Università di Padova che hanno partecipato al programma, la ricerca esamina come le percezioni e le abilità di comunicazione interculturale degli studenti siano evolute nel corso dello scambio virtuale con partecipanti provenienti da contesti geografici e culturali diversi.

Il corpus dello studio è costituito dai diari settimanali e dai saggi riflessivi finali degli studenti, che catturano riflessioni personali sulle sfide e le esperienze di apprendimento legate all'interazione con individui di altre culture. Questi testi offrono spunti autentici sui percorsi emotivi e cognitivi degli studenti, mentre affrontano le sfide della comunicazione interculturale, inclusi ostacoli linguistici, ansia e il processo di costruzione di legami interpersonali e competenze interculturali nel tempo.

Questa ricerca si basa su teorie di Competenza Comunicativa Interculturale (ICC) e Mobilità Virtuale, con contributi teorici fondamentali da studiosi come Byram (1997) e O'Dowd (2017). Questi quadri teorici sono utili per comprendere come la mobilità virtuale e la competenza interculturale possano promuovere un dialogo significativo tra culture, colmando efficacemente le distanze geografiche e favorendo la comprensione reciproca.

Il processo di analisi dei dati ha coinvolto diverse fasi chiave. Innanzitutto, i diari e i saggi riflessivi sono stati raccolti e organizzati sistematicamente. Successivamente, è stata condotta un'analisi tematica per identificare i temi ricorrenti, e sono state sviluppate tabelle e grafici per rappresentare visivamente le tendenze su temi chiave quali ansia, tristezza e barriere linguistiche nel corso delle otto settimane di scambio. I risultati sono stati riassunti in tabelle, illustrando, ad esempio, le tendenze dei livelli di ansia, delle sfide

linguistiche e delle risposte emotive al termine del programma, facilitando così un'interpretazione comparativa dei dati.

La tesi è organizzata in tre capitoli principali. Il primo Capitolo fornisce una base teorica sulla comunicazione interculturale e sulla mobilità virtuale, esplorando concetti chiave come la Competenza Comunicativa Interculturale e il ruolo del dialogo guidato nella promozione dell'empatia interculturale. Il capitolo introduce il Soliya Connect Program nel contesto della mobilità virtuale come strumento di formazione interculturale in ambito accademico.

Il secondo Capitolo presenta un'analisi dettagliata dei diari degli studenti e dei saggi riflessivi, evidenziando le sfide affrontate dagli studenti, tra cui l'ansia e le barriere linguistiche, e le strategie impiegate per superarle. Il capitolo include tabelle che mostrano la progressione settimanale di queste esperienze, documentando come gli studenti abbiano gradualmente superato le barriere emotive e linguistiche grazie all'interazione strutturata e al supporto di un facilitatore.

Infine, il terzo Capitolo riflette sui risultati dello studio, affrontando le domande di ricerca su come le percezioni degli studenti riguardo alle interazioni interculturali si siano trasformate in un contesto virtuale. Inoltre, si discute l'impatto del programma sulla riduzione dell'ansia, sul superamento delle barriere linguistiche e sulla creazione di connessioni sociali significative, dimostrando infine come la mobilità virtuale possa coltivare empatia e consapevolezza interculturale.