

Fostering Intercultural Competence through UNESCO Story Circles: A Virtual Exchange Case Study with EFL Learners

Ana Vivian Fernández-Peraza^{1*}, Yumiko Furmura², Masazumi Maruyama³

¹ Universidad de Costa Rica, Costa Rica

² Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, Japan

³ Nagasaki University, Japan, Japan

*Corresponding author's email: ana.fernandezperaza@ucr.ac.cr

*ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6112-7334>

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: computer-assisted language learning (CALL), competences for democratic culture (CDC), intercultural communication, UNESCO Story Circles, virtual exchange, EFL learning

The integration of technology in education has opened new avenues for promoting global citizenship and democratic culture among EFL learners through virtual exchanges and intercultural dialogue. This study explores, from the learners' perspective, the integration and effectiveness of UNESCO Story Circles as reflective activities in the context of a virtual exchange involving 22 EFL university students from Costa Rica and Japan. A mixed-method approach was used. By analyzing participants' feedback, the research demonstrates how the use of UNESCO Story Circles within a virtual exchange fosters the development of some competences for democratic culture and critical reflection. Ultimately, the findings highlight the role virtual exchanges and UNESCO Story Circles in enhancing global citizenship and supporting inclusive intercultural dialogue in EFL education.

Introduction

In recent years, considerable concern has arisen over issues of intercultural competence in the context of foreign language education. Thus, foreign language education has transitioned from merely teaching linguistic skills and knowledge to embracing a broader intercultural perspective (Byram et al., 2002; Byram & Wagner, 2018). This shift in foreign language education aligns with the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) (Barrett et al., 2018), which emphasizes the importance of fostering democratic values and intercultural understanding in educational settings. Accordingly, the foreign language classroom is no longer a place where language learners exclusively learn a language, it has become a place where they can develop a whole range of competences for interacting with people who are culturally different.

In this context, a variety of language teaching practices have been implemented to develop competences for democratic culture in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), promoting global citizenship through language education and intercultural dialogue. In recent years, virtual exchanges have emerged as a powerful tool, enabling language learners to engage in meaningful

intercultural interactions with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds (O'Dowd, 2021). To this end, UNESCO Story Circles (Deardorff, 2020) also provide a structured and adaptable methodology for fostering intercultural dialogue through storytelling, promoting competences such as respect, listening for understanding, cultural curiosity, and relationship-building.

Literature review

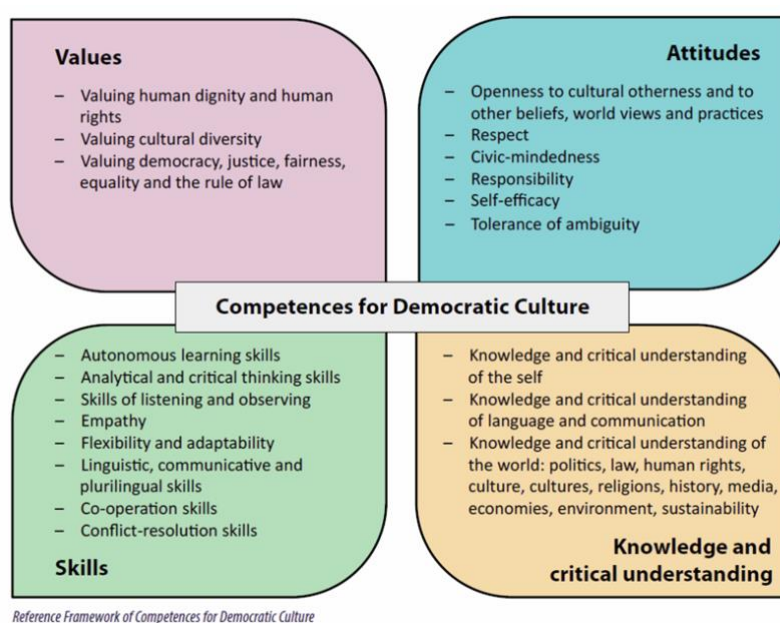
Competences for Democratic Culture

Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997) provided the theoretical foundation of the conceptual model supporting the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) proposed by Barrett and a group of experts, including Byram, in 2018 (Barrett et al., 2018).

In this model, the competences for democratic culture are defined as relevant values, attitudes, skills and knowledge and critical understanding that an individual needs to mobilize and deploy to respond appropriately and effectively to the constantly shifting demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by democratic and intercultural situations. The RFCDC model outlines 20 competences essential for democratic intercultural engagement, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Competence model proposed by the RFCDC



Note. From Barrett et al. (2018)

One important feature in this model is the role of language learning. Although the RFCDC was not specifically developed with language education in mind, it places special importance on language and communication. The framework highlights the crucial role of language, as a medium and as a tool, in the development and exercise of the learners' democratic and intercultural competences. As stated by Barret et al. (2018), "the acquisition of CDC is also

dependent on language competences” (p. 17). This makes the RFCDC highly relevant for language education, as language learning offers a variety of opportunities to cultivate critical thinking, empathy, openness, communicative skills, and the ability to engage responsibly and respectfully with diversity—which are key competences in the RFCDC.

During the past five years, the RFCDC model or some of its components has been used and researched in higher education in several countries of the European Union, as reported by Santibanez and Hoskins (2023). Although this reference framework was specifically developed as a tool for promoting democratic and intercultural competences in the European context, its principles resonate globally, influencing language education worldwide. So, it has also been addressed in virtual exchange projects involving non-European countries, such as the Argentina, Costa Rica, Japan, and the United States (for example, Abe & Beecroft, 2024; Fernández Peraza and Furumura, 2022, 2023; Golubeva and Porto, 2022; Rauschert and Cardetti, 2022).

Virtual Exchange in Foreign Language Education

Virtual exchanges (VE) “have become a widely used and powerful alternative to improve foreign language communication skills in a meaningful way, as well as promoting cultural understanding and the development of digital literacy skills in higher education” (Fernández Peraza and Furumura, 2018, p. 1). According to the Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange (EVOLVE) project, VE is a pedagogical practice consisting of:

sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programmes or activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators. (EVOLVE, 2020)

VE is grounded on technology-based collaborative interaction and intercultural dialogue, and it is different from other types of traditional online learning because of key features, as identified by O’Dowd (2022). VE involves “1) technology-based interaction; 2) engagement with members of other cultures/countries; 3) integration into curriculum; 4) facilitation and support by educators or experts; 5) a strong (but not exclusive) focus on the development of soft skills and intercultural competence; 6) a student-centered, collaborative approach to learning” (O’Dowd, 2022, p. 13). These features make VE particularly suitable for foreign language learning and for advancing democratic culture and intercultural understanding.

CALL-mediated VE projects allow learners to develop critical digital literacy skills, fostering active engagement in cross-cultural dialogue (Helm & O’Dowd, 2020; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018; Tahboub, 2024). Worldwide, scholars and educators have also recognized their benefits in promoting intercultural understanding, developing language skills, and fostering global citizenship in foreign language education (Fernández Peraza & Furumura, 2022; Golubeva & Porto, 2022; Hagley, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2024; O’Dowd, 2021; Van Rompay-Bartels et al., 2024).

UNESCO Story Circles

UNESCO Story Circles is a structured, but flexible methodology developed by Deardorff

(2020), originally as a UNESCO tool for helping people of diverse backgrounds to understand each other better. Basically, UNESCO Story Circles cultivate democratic values such as freedom of expression, equality, and inclusivity, while promoting intercultural understanding. Thus, the methodology can be considered as a practical tool for developing and practicing some of the competences outlined by the RFDC. According to Deardorff (2020), some intercultural competencies goals for Story Circles are: “demonstrating respect for others, practicing listening for understanding, cultivating curiosity about similarities and differences with others, gaining increased cultural self-awareness, developing empathy, and developing relationships with culturally different others” (p. 16).

In general terms, UNESCO Story Circles are divided into five moments: 1) getting acquainted, 2) sharing intercultural experiences, 3) sharing flashbacks, 4) discussion/debriefing, and 5) conclusion. Strict time parameters are observed, so that every participant has equal opportunities and no one person dominates. One important element of this tool is the debriefing time, which should not be shortened. According to Deardorff (2020), “this is a key part of the tool since it involves the crucial reflection elements in developing intercultural competencies” (p. 43-44). This makes the UNESCO Story Circles an appropriate reflective activity, where the participants need to reflect on their previous experiences to share them in the circle, but also reflect on the shared stories, and the whole sharing and learning experience.

UNESCO Story Circles have been successfully used in a variety of international settings, including language education, demonstrating its effectiveness in fostering communication and intercultural sensitivity and reflection (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022; Ergai et al. 2022; Giménez Milán & Acosta Güemes, 2023; Giménez Milán, 2025). Although there are plenty of studies on the use of storytelling in foreign language learning (for example, Akyildiz & Kaya, 2023; Sellami, 2025), there is little evidence on the use and effectiveness of UNESCO Story Circles in language education (Fast, 2023), let alone on the use of UNESCO Story Circles in virtual exchanges (Fernández Peraza & Furumura, 2023).

Although several studies have addressed the potential of virtual exchanges for developing intercultural competences, limited attention has been paid to the implementation of structured intercultural dialogue methodologies, such as UNESCO Story Circles, in EFL education. Also, the application of the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) in non-European EFL contexts remains relatively underexplored. Thus, this study addresses this gap by exploring, from the learners’ perspective, the integration and effectiveness of UNESCO Story Circles as reflective activities in the context of a virtual exchange involving EFL university students from Costa Rica and Japan. The research questions guiding this study are:

- How do UNESCO Story Circles contribute to the development of competences for democratic culture as perceived by the EFL learners?
- What are students' perceptions about the development of competences addressed through the UNESCO Story Circles?
- What challenges and opportunities emerge from implementing Story Circles as reflective activities in a VE project?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

Description of the VE project

The project took place in 2022 over a period of 10 weeks. It was divided into four stages (which were called “Self-Introduction”, “This is interesting!”, “Let’s compare our countries!”, and “Cultural Snapshot”), after which participants engaged in guided dialogue and reflection through UNESCO Story Circles. The VE project included a variety of synchronous and asynchronous activities and tasks, such as sharing self-introduction videos, using photos and creating presentations to identify and compare cultural issues in both countries, producing videos providing the participants’ perspectives on Costa Rica and Japan, responding to other participants’ contributions, and reflecting on the VE experience. A total of five live sessions were organized via Microsoft Teams, four of which were devoted to UNESCO Story Circles. Each UNESCO Story Circle session lasted approximately 90 minutes and followed the structured methodology proposed by Deardorff (2020). Padlet boards were used to share the participants contributions and facilitate asynchronous interactions, while PowerPoint, Canva, and video editing applications were used for creating presentations and videos.

Participants

The VE project involved 20 Costa Rican and 12 Japanese university EFL students from Universidad de Costa Rica and Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. All participants were enrolled in undergraduate programs and, overall, their proficiency levels ranged from B1 to C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Participants had had previous experience with online learning but had not been involved in VE projects before.

Participants participated voluntarily in the study. From the start of the virtual exchange, they were informed about the purpose of the study and the way the data would be used and protected. The responses were collected anonymously and treated with strict confidentiality.

Design of the Study

This study follows a case study approach (Yin, 2018), including both quantitative and qualitative data. The combination of measurable outcomes and the participants’ personal opinions allowed a more comprehensive understanding of the participants’ perceptions about the use of the UNESCO Story Circles within the VE project to contribute to the development of competences for democratic culture.

Participants’ perceptions were gathered through a questionnaire comprising closed-ended questions for quantitative data and open-ended questions for qualitative insights. Simple frequency analysis provided a quantitative overview of participants’ response patterns, while thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data, to identify emerging patterns in participants’ perceptions.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data Collection

The feedback questionnaire was administered online after taking part in four story circles

organized as conclusion for each stage. Immediacy in administering the questionnaire after each stage ensured that the participants' impression of the experience was still fresh. The questionnaire was an adaptation of the feedback questionnaire proposed by Deardorff (2020). It included 13 close-ended items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "Not at all" to "Fully") and inquiring about the perceived effectiveness of the story circles for developing the targeted competencies: respecting others, listening for understanding, curiosity about similarities and differences with others, cultural self-awareness, empathy, and relationships with different others. Eight open-ended questions prompted participants to reflect on weaknesses, strengths, areas of improvement of the activity, as well as challenging issues, and additional remarks.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the close-ended questions was subjected to simple frequency analysis, which is a descriptive statistical method that shows the number of occurrences of each response chosen by the respondents. This analysis provided a summary of response patterns, revealing dominant trends and supporting claims about participant perceptions.

To ensure the trustworthiness and consistency of the qualitative analysis, intercoder reliability was addressed through a collaborative and iterative process. Initially, the analysis of the data collected from the open-ended questions' responses followed an inductive thematic analysis approach using the Computer-Assisted Text Markup and Analysis (CATMA) software, version 6.5.5. Thus, the researchers independently generated initial codes (tags) to capture important concepts and ideas in the open-ended questions.

The researchers engaged in multiple rounds of online discussion to compare the initial codes, solve discrepancies, and refine the coding schemes. This analysis involved a systematic exploration of the data to identify additional codes and sub-themes (sub-tags) that were not initially anticipated. Consensus was reached on the development of shared themes and sub-themes (sub-tags) that captured the essence of the participants' reflections. This process ensured that interpretations were aligned and grounded in the data.

Although no statistical measure was used, the collaborative development of a coding frame and the dialogic and consensus-building process ensured a high degree of interpretative agreement, which has been recognized as a rigorous and valid method for ensuring intercoder reliability in exploratory studies (Cofie, Braund, & Dalgarno, 2022).

Findings and discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that UNESCO Story Circles in a virtual exchange contribute to the development of intercultural and democratic competences among EFL learners.

Perceived Effectiveness of UNESCO Story Circles

The data suggests that the UNESCO Story Circles activities had a positive and multifaceted impact on participants. It not only enhanced their intercultural competences such as respect, empathy, and intercultural communication, but also promoted self-awareness and a desire to explore diversity. All participants indicated that the activity helped them respect other people

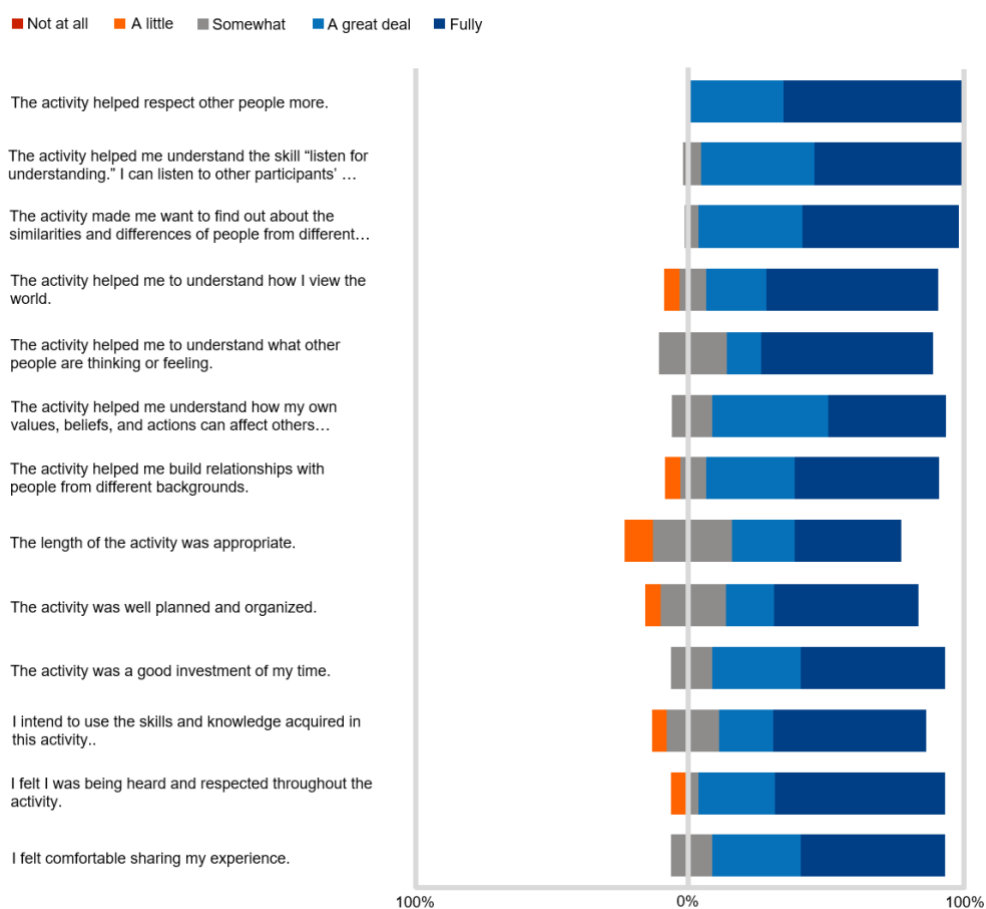
more by marking “A great deal” or “Fully”, while a large majority reported that they improved their ability to listen for understanding during the activities, a very important skill to be developed in foreign language learning, but also an indication of being a competent intercultural communicator.

The positive evaluation of the activity's length, planning, and organization, along with participants' intentions to apply the acquired skills, indicates a meaningful and worthwhile learning experience. The widespread feeling of being heard and respected highlights the success of the activity in creating an inclusive and supportive environment. Additionally, the reported change in perception suggests a transformative effect on participants' attitudes toward others from different backgrounds. This perception of change can also be considered as an indication of the development of the targeted competences.

Overall, the data underscores the effectiveness of the UNESCO Story Circles in fostering a positive and enriching intercultural learning experience that helped the participants develop the targeted competencies. Figure 2 shows in a graphical form some of the responses.

Figure 2

Perceived effectiveness of UNESCO Story Circles



The results obtained align with Helm and O'Dowd's (2020) idea that a structured online interaction, like the implementation of UNESCO Story Circles in a VE, can lead to positive

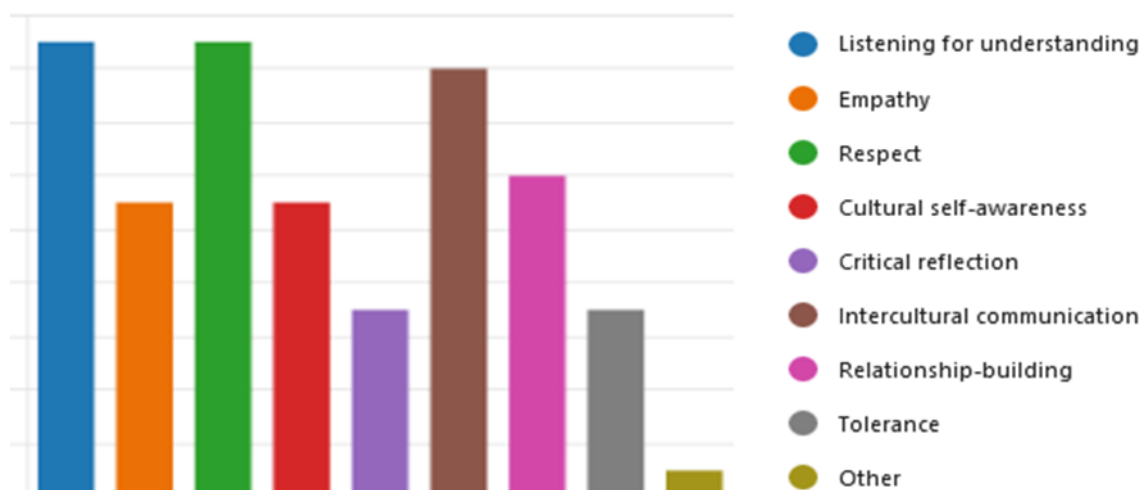
outcomes in terms of intercultural and foreign language competences, especially when students have limited exposure to face-to-face intercultural interactions and settings.

Perceived development of intercultural competences through UNESCO Story Circles

In general, the participants' responses hint to a comprehensive development of intercultural competences, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Perceived development of intercultural competences through UNESCO Story Circles



The participants consistently marked all targeted competences proposed by Deardorff (2020), that is, listening for understanding, empathy, respect, cultural self-awareness, critical reflection, intercultural communication, relationship-building, and tolerance.

Emphasis on communication skills was evident, when the participants predominantly identified listening for understanding and intercultural communication. This highlights the importance of effective communication in cross-cultural interactions. The consistent selection of targeted competences also suggests a holistic approach to cultural competence development because they were not only paying attention to communication skills, but also to respect, building relationships, fostering empathy, and critically reflecting on cultural differences.

Respect and empathy were consistently recognized by the participants, which is a suggestion of how they grasped the importance of understanding other's perspectives and treating them with respect. Also, by acknowledging cultural self-awareness, the participants demonstrated their understanding of the importance of their own cultural background and its influence on intercultural interactions. These competences are crucial elements in advancing meaningful and effective intercultural interactions.

Critical reflection was mentioned by several participants. This is a suggestion that UNESCO Story Circles encouraged them to critically analyze their own beliefs, assumptions, and cultural biases, which contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of communication dynamics in intercultural encounters. From the learning point of view, reflective thinking is a necessary process in the development of intercultural competences, as recognized by McAllister et al.

(2006), McConachy (2017), and Nardon (2019).

It is also important to note that tolerance and relationship building, although marked to a lesser extent, were identified as developed competences as well. This is an indication of a positive appreciation of cultural differences and the participants' willingness to make meaningful connections with different others.

Finally, some students also acknowledged 'other' competences. This might imply that UNESCO Story Circles contributed to the development of competences beyond those targeted by Deardorff (2020). As perceived by the participants, other competences included confidence and being able to communicate, which are recognized as key components of intercultural competence to increase learner's self-efficacy and motivation to engage in intercultural dialogue (Kabir & Sponseller, 2020).

Challenges of UNESCO Story Circles

The participants' responses to the closed-ended questions also gave hints of issues to be addressed in the future that could enhance the experience of engaging in UNESCO Story Circles within a virtual exchange. Some students marked "A little", when asked about the length of the activity. This is an issue that has already been recognized by Ergai et al. (2022), who mentioned initial discomfort associated with a timed and structured activity when using UNESCO Story Circles with engineering students. It is important to mention that precise timing in this methodology guarantees equal opportunities for participants in terms of allotted time for speaking (Deardorff, 2020; Giménez Milán & Acosta Güemes, 2023).

Participants' Perspectives on the Effectiveness of UNESCO Story Circles in the VE Project

The thematic analysis provided further insights into the learners' perspectives on the effectiveness of UNESCO Story Circles in the VE project. The identified themes in general aligned with the quantitative data findings. The following key themes emerged, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Themes, sample codes, and sample responses

| Themes | Sample codes | Sample responses |
|--|---|--|
| Development of intercultural competences | speaking, listening, interaction with others, respect | <i>The best thing for me was to interact with people from Costa Rica, who I was not familiar, and to gain a new sense of values. [sic]</i> <i>To be able to understand each other perspective [sic]</i> <i>we can talk with foreigner and know several perspectives. [sic]</i> |
| Perceptions of UNESCO Story Circles | Helpful, enjoyable, engaging, relationship building, learning, safe | <i>knowledge, friendship and practice [sic]</i> <i>Practice and involved the listening and communication skills [sic]</i> <i>Fun to know about differences</i> |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| | | <i>in both countries. [sic] I felt comfortable sharing my experiences. [sic]</i> |
| Challenges in implementation | Time, connection issues, shyness, language proficiency | <i>The time allotted to speak with people was kind of short. [sic] Had internet problems online many times. [sic] to speak out to new people [sic] When I was belong to a group with my friend who can speak English better than me, I cannot have confidence and hesitate talking [sic]</i> |
| Opportunities and suggestions for improvement | improved communication skills, cultural exchange, timing, technical issues | <i>By getting more chances of speaking English, I can feel confident. [sic] The fact that you're able to speak with people from a country which is very different from yours is really good Everything was pretty good, but the time [sic] we used Teams [Teams]. So, sometimes there are trouble about network. [sic]</i> |

These findings contribute to demonstrate the contribution of UNESCO Story Circles to the development of competences for democratic culture and intercultural dialogue, particularly in communication and intercultural awareness. In general, the participants viewed the activity as beneficial for language learning and intercultural communication. Challenges do exist, in the form of time constraints and technical issues; while identified opportunities also speak of the potential of UNESCO Story Circles, as they relate to improved communication skills and respectful, inclusive intercultural interaction.

Conclusion

The aim of the study, to explore, from the learners' perspective, the integration and effectiveness of UNESCO Story Circles as reflective activities in the context of a virtual exchange involving EFL university students from Costa Rica and Japan, was successfully achieved. It can be concluded that UNESCO Story Circles as a reflective activity has a positive impact on the development of competences for democratic culture in EFL students. The perceived positive impact on various competences, combined with the reported transformation in perception and relationships, emphasizes the effectiveness of the UNESCO Story Circles in virtual exchanges for the development of competences for democratic culture. The drawbacks identified provide valuable insights for future implementations, emphasizing the continuous improvement of virtual exchange projects to maximize their educational potential.

This study revealed how UNESCO Story Circles, as reflective activities, can support the development of democratic competences and intercultural dialogue in the context of a virtual

exchange project involving EFL students. However, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. As a case study with a small, convenience-based sample, its results are not generalizable. In addition, although the study adopted a mixed-methods approach, the data were treated as a single unit, and data source triangulation was not fully applied. Hence, future research could benefit from large samples. Also, longitudinal designs and comparative case studies could provide deeper and long-term understanding of the sustained impact of UNESCO Story Circles in virtual exchange activities.

The implications and future directions of this study relate to addressing technical aspects to ensure a better experience for the participants and to targeted language support to build confidence and self-efficacy of participants with language limitations. Advancing research on the implementation of UNESCO Story Circles and its impact in foreign language learning and virtual exchanges can contribute to the improvement of language learning pedagogical approaches and the continuous improvement of virtual exchange projects for creating meaningful and safe spaces for intercultural interaction. In the long run, given the transformative nature of the experience, assessing how these competences for democratic culture evolve and are retained over time is essential for measuring long-term effectiveness of UNESCO Story Circles and virtual exchanges.

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Conflict of Interests

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Biodata

Ana Vivian Fernández Peraza holds a master's degree in English Language from Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas (Cuba) and a doctoral degree in Linguistic Sciences from Universidad de La Habana (Cuba). She has 25 years of teaching and research experience in higher education. She is currently working for the School of Foreign Languages at the Universidad de Costa Rica. Her research interests lie at the intersection of foreign language education and technology, exploring how digital technologies can facilitate meaningful intercultural interactions and support EFL teaching and learning.

Yumiko Furumura earned her doctoral degree in Social and Cultural Studies from Kyushu University in Japan in 2007. She is a professor at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, Japan, where she instructs Intercultural Communication and English as a Foreign Language. Additionally, she has a background in teaching English at Nagasaki University from 2012 to 2020. Her recent research and publications focus on intercultural education within English language instruction, leveraging computer technology, specifically on developing both intercultural and linguistic competence.

Masazumi Maruyama received Ph.D. in Communication from the Department of Communication, University of Oklahoma, in 1998. He is an Associate Professor of Intercultural Communication at Nagasaki University, Japan, where he teaches Intercultural Communication and Multilingual and Multicultural Society. His recent research and publications focus on (online) intercultural collaborative learning, COIL, English as a lingua-franca, and translanguaging.