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Immersive Contexts and Oral Fluency Development Among ESL Learners in the United States: An Action Research Study^(*)

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Abstract

This action research study employed a triangulated methodology, incorporating pre- and postquestionnaires, to explore the oral fluency development of six advanced ESL students. The study compared the impact of immersion in a U.S. target language environment with learning in a home culture context. Findings indicated that students who maximized their engagement with native English speakers within the target culture demonstrated significantly greater advancements in oral fluency compared to their peers who opted not to fully utilize the linguistic and cultural environment. This study emphasizes the transformative potential of immersive language learning experiences and contributes to the understanding of best practices in second language acquisition (SLA).

Keywords: Immersive Contexts, Oral Fluency, ESL/EFL, SLA, Learners' Perception.

Introduction:

In today's globalized world, the necessity for multilingual proficiency has increased, which has led to a reevaluation of how second languages are most effectively acquired. Historically, multilingualism or even bilingualism was seen as a rare intellectual feat. Today, however, economic, social, and technological advancements have turned bilingualism into a practical necessity rather than an exception. As globalization has proliferated, so too has the need to refine methods for effective language acquisition, particularly focusing on immersive and contextual learning.

From personal experience, having transitioned from studying English as a foreign language in my home country to engaging in an immersive learning experience in the United States, I have observed key differences in how language skills, especially oral fluency, are developed. Both learning contexts have advantages and disadvantages in the overall learning process. From this point started my interest in searching on how learning a second/foreign language can be put into a context where the learner can gain the ideal environment for learning. These observations inspired an exploration of how immersive contexts influence second language proficiency.

The research focused on a diverse group of five advanced ESL students from four countries. The class contained about sixteen students in total. The focus group was five students from four different countries; three males and two females. The class meets three times a week and I was the teacher assistant in the class.

Different sorts of activities were involved in the class; they varied from impromptu speaking to public speech and some presentations as well. I can tell from the beginning that the students seemed excited about the class and ambitious at the same time. **The research seeks to address two core questions:**

- 1- To what extent does immersion in a target culture enhance oral fluency compared to learning in a home culture context?
- 2- How do second language learners' oral fluency skills evolve over time, and to what extent does their first language experience interfere or facilitate this process?

Literature Review:

The importance of immersive learning contexts in second language acquisition (SLA) has been a focal point of linguistic research for decades. Achieving oral fluency-a primary goal for most second language learners-is often linked to consistent and meaningful interaction with native speakers within the target culture. The role of immersive contexts in second language acquisition (SLA) has been extensively studied, with foundational theories shaping current understanding. Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input in natural settings, arguing that meaningful exposure enables learners to internalize linguistic structures effectively. Building on this, Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis posited that negotiation of meaning in conversations with native speakers is crucial for language development, as it promotes engagement with complex linguistic features.

Sol Adler (1993) identified four significant barriers that hinder language learning: insufficient academic preparation, unfamiliarity with cultural nuances, limited interaction with native speakers, and inadequate assessment mechanisms. These obstacles continue to influence modern ESL pedagogy, as educators seek strategies to minimize their impact. However, overcoming these barriers requires innovative approaches, as highlighted by more recent scholarship.

These challenges remain relevant, prompting educators to develop strategies to mitigate their impact. A unique approach to examining fluency was introduced by Towell (2002), who employed "personal adventure" narratives to elicit authentic speech samples. This method involves having subjects recount significant personal experiences without topic restrictions, promoting spontaneous and fluent language use. Towell argued that when learners are deeply familiar and emotionally invested in the topics they discuss, their oral fluency is markedly enhanced. This technique informed the current study's data collection approach, as it offers a natural means of eliciting high-quality, representative speech samples.

Similarly, Guillot (1999) examined the balance between fluency and control in planned speech. He underscored the importance of granting learners autonomy over their linguistic output, arguing that when students have greater control, they can better manage speech fluency, fostering

confidence and proficiency. Guillot's findings have informed instructional methods that prioritize learner agency and adaptive feedback mechanisms.

The question of age-related critical periods for achieving native-like fluency has also been widely debated. The work of Bialystok and Miller (1999) remains pivotal, as it explored age as a determinant of language acquisition success. They found that while younger learners often attain higher proficiency levels, oral fluency development can occur at any age, indicating a more nuanced relationship between age and language learning outcomes. Subsequent studies, such as those by Muñoz and Singleton (2007), have reinforced this notion, emphasizing that while age can influence learning speed, critical period effects are not as deterministic as once believed.

Recent research continues to explore the role of immersion and its impact on language fluency. Taguchi (2019) investigated pragmatic competence in study-abroad contexts, finding that immersion significantly improves learners' pragmatic and sociolinguistic skills. Extending this, Taguchi (2021) investigated digital immersion through online language exchange platforms, revealing that virtual interactions with native speakers can replicate some benefits of physical immersion, particularly in pragmatic fluency. Likewise, DeKeyser (2003) examined the differential impacts of explicit instruction and immersion, concluding that while both approaches have merits, immersive contexts often yield superior outcomes in spontaneous oral production (cited in Fordyce 2014). Additionally, Godfroid, Boers, and Housen (2013) conducted an eye tracking study that demonstrated the importance of interactional feedback in immersive environments, linking visual attention patterns to improved fluency. Emerging studies on technology-enhanced immersion offer new insights. Saito and Plonsky (2019) conducted a metaanalysis of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), finding that tools like interactive software and virtual reality simulations significantly improve oral fluency by providing simulated immersive environments. These findings align with the growing use of such digital platforms.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of cultural and linguistic immersion in developing oral fluency. This research study draws on these foundational and contemporary works to investigate how immersive learning environments shape ESL learners' speech production.

Methodology:

Three triangulation data collection instruments were used during the period of conducting this action study. First of all, the researcher log was the main tool of the triangulation in collecting data process. The observation of students during the class usually included: writing general comments about the students' potential contributions and presentations, taking notes about students' attitude towards what was being taught, and noticing how much improvement was taking place within each one of the participants. In addition to that, the participants were asked to fill out pre and post questionnaires about their general English literacy and oral fluency on the second language. The purpose of the questionnaires was for data collection as well as to see how much improvement of the students' attitudes towards their oral fluency and their overall speaking abilities.

In order to see the students' overall literacy level, some samples of the participants writing were collected and observed during this action study as the third tool in this triangulation.

Those were collected two times during the study. Under the teacher's and students' permission, some of the conversations and presentations were tape recorded during the class time to use them as a comparison tool between their proficiency levels at the beginning and the end of the semester. Last but not least, random interviews were conducted with some of the participants anonymously to see their real attitude towards the class in general, daily activities and their own progression in the oral fluency.

Participants:

The study involved five advanced-level ESL students, aged 19 to 25, from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Participants included one student from Turkey, one from Thailand, one from Saudi Arabia, and two from China. The cohort consisted of three male and two female students, each offering unique perspectives on language learning.

Setting:

The research was conducted in an advanced speaking class at the ESL Center of Kent State University. The classroom, equipped with modern instructional technology, was arranged to facilitate interactive discussions, with students seated in a semicircle around a central conference table.

Data Collection Instruments

1- Researcher Log:

A comprehensive researcher log was maintained throughout the study. This log documented classroom observations, student participation, and detailed reflections on participants' progression. Notes captured students' engagement, speech fluency, and overall attitude toward language learning.

2- Questionnaires:

Pre-and post-questionnaires were administered to gauge participants' perceptions of their oral fluency and their general attitudes toward language acquisition. Questions explored the role of technology in learning, the impact of peer linguistic backgrounds, and self assessed proficiency across the four language skills. (See Appendix A for a sample questionnaire).

3- Artifacts and Voice Recordings:

Samples of student writing and oral presentations were collected at two intervals: the beginning and end of the study. Audio recordings of class discussions and presentations were analyzed to assess fluency development, with student and instructor consent.

4- Interviews:

Randomized, anonymous interviews were conducted to provide deeper insight into students' attitudes and experiences. These interviews captured candid reflections on classroom dynamics, personal challenges, and perceived progress.

Data Analysis:

Data were triangulated to ensure robustness. Questionnaire responses were quantified to identify trends in perceptions, while qualitative data from logs, recordings, and interviews were coded for themes related to immersion, fluency, and cultural influences. Analysis focused on aligning findings with the research questions, with case studies structured to highlight individual progress and its relation to immersive contexts.

Results:

Participant Background and Composition.

The study featured five participants, each representing diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The sample included two females and three males from four distinct national contexts: two participants were Chinese (one male,

M2, and one female, F1), one was Turkish (M3), one was Saudi Arabian (M1), and one was Thai (F2). These participants had each lived in the United States for a minimum of six months, a duration that provided sufficient exposure to an English-speaking environment while highlighting variations in individual oral fluency levels. This diversity in both cultural origin and language proficiency was instrumental in examining how distinct experiences and linguistic challenges shape second language acquisition (SLA).

Group-Level Results:

The study utilized a pre- and post-questionnaire consisting of fifteen questions (Appendix A) to measure shifts in participants' perceptions of language learning. This analysis focuses on three pivotal questions from the questionnaire, specifically questions (10, 11), and (13), which investigate critical dimensions of SLA:

- 1- Cultural Immersion (Question 10):** Participants were asked if learning a new language within the target culture was beneficial. Responses were categorized into “yes” (learning benefits) and “no” (feeling homesick or not utilizing the culture effectively).
- 2- Role of Technology (Question 11):** The questionnaire explored the extent to which technology aids in language learning, with responses classified as “yes” (technology helps) and “no” (technology does not help).
- 3- Peer Dynamics (Question 13):** Participants reflected on whether having peers from their native culture in the same class positively or negatively affected language learning, categorized as “positive” or “negative.”

Pre-Study

Table (1)

Question Positive)	Post-Study (% Positive)
Q10: Cultural Immersion 100% Beneficial	100% (with emphasis on active engagement)
Q11: Technology Aids Learning 80%	60%
Q13: Peer Cohesion Impact 60% Positive	40% Positive

Overview of Findings

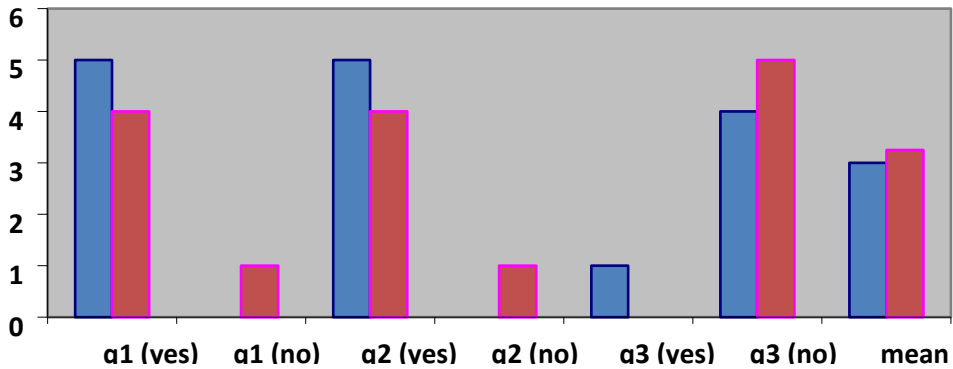


Figure (1)

Figure 1 displays the comparative responses for the entire group before and after the intervention. Key themes emerged, indicating the complexities and evolving attitudes surrounding cultural immersion, the use of technology, and classroom dynamics among learners from varied backgrounds.

Individual Case Studies and Analysis

Case Study #1 – M1

Questionnaire Insights

M1 demonstrated a preference for listening as his strongest skill in both pre- and post assessments, considering it the easiest to master. He expressed strong support for learning English in a target culture setting (Question 10), emphasizing the immersive benefits for language acquisition. M1 also affirmed the positive influence of technology on language learning (Question 11), though he voiced reservations about having compatriots in his class, fearing the potential use of his native language.

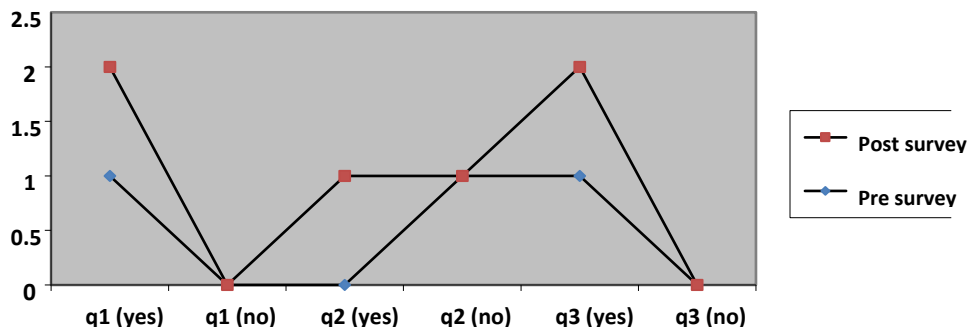


Figure (2)

Artifacts and Contributions:

M1 submitted weekly vocabulary journals and speech outlines, though he occasionally failed to meet submission guidelines fully. A review of his journal entries indicated some progress in vocabulary acquisition, albeit with inconsistencies in adherence to instructions.

Researcher Observations:

M1 was noted for his active engagement and willingness to seek clarification, displaying a proactive attitude uncommon among his peers. His courage to speak up, even at the risk of making mistakes, distinguished him as an assertive learner, contributing significantly to classroom discourse. Despite several absences, his overall performance and readiness justified an “A” assessment, supported by his consistent participation and inquisitive nature.

Case Study #2 – F1:

Questionnaire Insights

F1 identified speaking as her most challenging skill, a consistent view across both questionnaire phases. She found significant value in cultural immersion (Question 10) and regarded technology as a crucial tool for language improvement (Question 11), citing electronic dictionaries as particularly helpful. Notably, F1 changed her perspective on the presence of co-nationals: initially viewing it negatively, she later recognized its potential for fostering a supportive learning environment (Question 13).

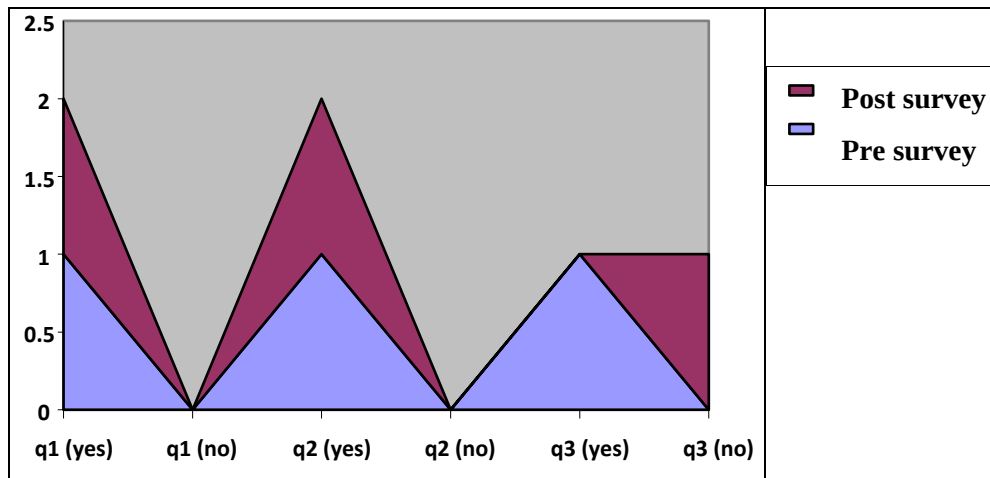


Figure (3)

Artifacts and Contributions

F1 was meticulous in her work, submitting all required outlines and actively utilizing memory aids during her presentations. Her commitment to preparation and active participation, especially in leading group work, underscored her dedication to improvement.

Researcher Observations

F1's enthusiasm and consistent engagement with peers, including attempts to converse with the observer, were noteworthy. Her leadership in group activities and her dedication to assignments earned her an "A" evaluation, reflecting her readiness and ability to excel in an immersive learning context.

Case Study #3 – M2

Questionnaire Insights

M2 rated speaking as his strongest skill but struggled with reading and writing. While he initially supported technology's role in language learning, his post-assessment revealed a shift, rejecting the use of bilingual dictionaries. His views on peer presence also evolved, reversing from a positive to a negative stance regarding the influence of co-nationals in the classroom.

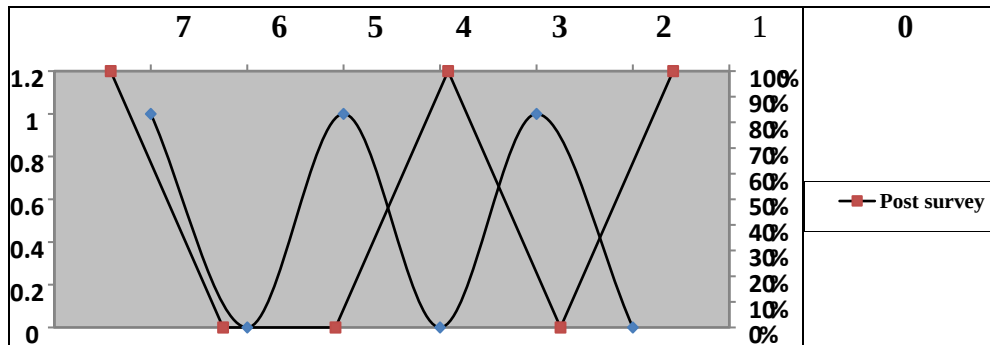


Figure (4)

Artifacts and Contributions

M2's artifact submissions were limited, reflecting his lack of organizational skills. Despite these shortcomings, his oral performance was notably strong, especially in debates and open discussions, which highlighted his confidence and speaking prowess.

Researcher Observations

Though less diligent with written assignments, M2 excelled in verbal communication, displaying impressive argumentation skills. His classroom

participation and oral fluency merited a grade above “B,” contingent on improved assignment compliance.

Case Study #4 – F2

Questionnaire Insights

F2 consistently rated speaking as her most difficult skill. She valued learning English within the target culture (Question 10) and acknowledged the benefits of technological tools, particularly dictionaries (Question 11). However, she expressed concern about the presence of peers from her country, fearing it would hinder her use of English.

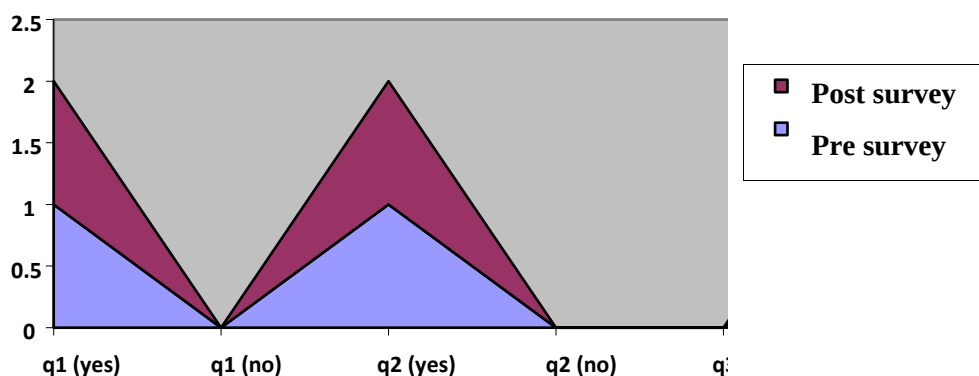


Figure (5)

Artifacts and Contributions:

F2 was among the few who diligently submitted all required materials, showing gradual improvement in her speech outlines. Teacher feedback highlighted her steady progress in presentation skills.

Researcher Observations:

F2 was quiet yet highly committed to her studies. Despite her reserved nature, her seriousness and meticulous approach to assignments earned her a “B+” assessment, with potential for greater oral fluency improvement.

Case Study #5 – M3:

Questionnaire Insights:

M3 identified speaking as the most challenging skill, though he found reading and writing manageable. He believed cultural immersion was beneficial (Question 10) and initially supported the use of technology, but later dismissed its impact, attributing language success to cognitive abilities.

He was skeptical about having compatriots in class, concerned about reverting to his native language.

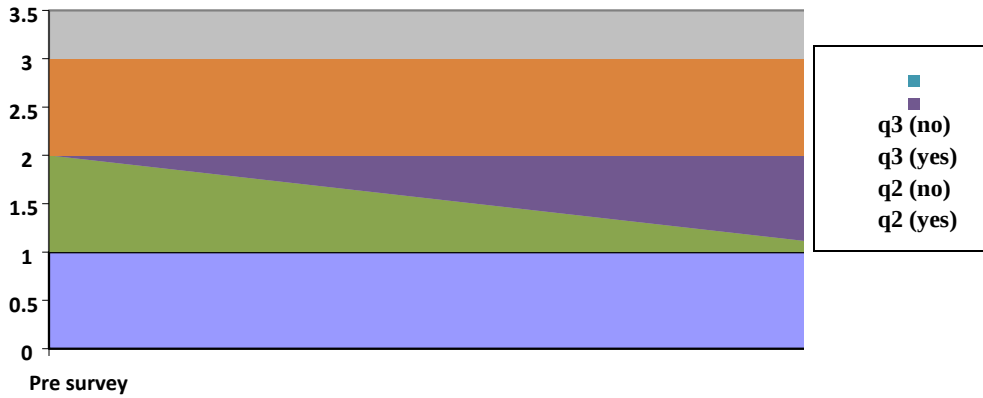


Figure (6)

Researcher Observations:

M3 displayed fluctuating commitment levels but showed improvement in group settings. While respectful and cooperative, he needed greater consistency and engagement. His classroom performance and occasional leadership in group work justified a “B” grade, acknowledging his potential yet need for greater dedication.

Summary of Findings:

This study illuminated the diverse trajectories of SLA among students from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Differences in engagement with cultural immersion, technological resources, and peer dynamics underscore the complexities of language learning in immersive environments. These insights inform the broader understanding of SLA, emphasizing the importance of personalized and adaptive educational strategies.

Discussion:

The findings confirm that immersion in a target culture markedly enhances oral fluency, but only when students actively engage with native speakers and cultural contexts; which illuminate the critical role that students' attitudes toward learning English in a target-language cultural setting play in shaping their oral fluency. However, it became evident that merely being physically present in a target culture does not suffice; the benefits only manifest when students actively engage in linguistic practices beyond the classroom, participating in authentic, real-life interactions. Without such engagement,

immersion's potential advantages remain untapped, and students may not experience significant gains. This notion was supported by a student's postquestionnaire remark emphasizing that unless the cultural context is explicitly leveraged as a learning tool, studying English in the target culture might not offer substantial benefits compared to learning in one's home environment. This observation underscores the importance of integrating cultural elements deliberately into language learning frameworks to maximize efficacy.

Addressing the original inquiry regarding the influence of students' first-language experiences on their language learning process, the study revealed significant interference stemming from both linguistic and cultural factors. For instance, participants from certain cultural backgrounds exhibited reluctance to participate in public speaking or ask questions, behaviors linked to norms in their home cultures. Nevertheless, not all students from these backgrounds were similarly constrained, with some demonstrating the ability to overcome these cultural barriers and engage more freely in the second-language learning context. Additionally, resistance to writing tasks emerged among several students, who questioned the relevance of writing assignments in a course ostensibly focused on oral fluency. This resistance was culturally rooted, as writing does not occupy the same importance in certain Eastern educational traditions as speaking or listening. Moreover, resource limitations in some participants' home countries were cited as further obstacles to developing writing skills, highlighting disparities in access to educational materials that can impact language acquisition.

One of the pivotal challenges identified in this study pertains to creating a classroom environment that mirrors real-life communication contexts. Effective language instruction demands careful consideration of tools and strategies that best support learners in achieving specific language goals efficiently. For example, in a course focused on oral proficiency, it may not be necessary to emphasize writing if students demonstrate consistent improvement in their speaking abilities. Individual differences inevitably shape learning trajectories, with some learners excelling in oral skills while others may have strengths in writing or listening. The findings emphasize the necessity of tailoring instruction to the primary objectives of the course rather than aiming for perfection across all language domains simultaneously.

Another notable discovery was the limited enthusiasm for integrating technology into the language learning process, except for the use of electronic dictionaries. It was surprising that none of the participants reported utilizing internet resources or educational software for vocabulary building or language literacy improvement. This finding is particularly striking given the ubiquity of digital technology in contemporary education and global communication. This contrasts with recent studies (Saito & Plonsky, 2019) advocating for CALL tools like Tandem or virtual reality simulations, which could enhance immersion. The limited enthusiasm for technology may reflect participants' unfamiliarity with advanced tools, suggesting a need for explicit integration in ESL curricula. Nevertheless, this result should be interpreted cautiously and not generalized to all language learners, as the specific experiences and preferences of this cohort may differ from broader trends in language education.

Finally, participants expressed a preference for avoiding classmates from their own countries, primarily to resist the temptation of reverting to their first language. This apprehension was justified, as students observed their peers frequently speaking in their native languages, even during class sessions. Longitudinally, Bialystok and Miller (1999) suggest that immersion's benefits persist, with sustained exposure potentially leading to near-native fluency. While this study focused on short-term outcomes, participants' progress indicates that continued cultural engagement could yield long-term gains, warranting further research.

Implications:

The implications of this research for language educators and curriculum designers are profound. First, it highlights the necessity of fostering opportunities for meaningful, culturally embedded language use beyond the classroom. Educators should consider designing experiential learning activities that require students to engage with native speakers and immerse themselves in cultural contexts. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of addressing cultural and linguistic barriers explicitly. Teachers must be sensitive to the ways in which students' first language experiences and cultural backgrounds shape their learning behaviors, developing strategies to support students in overcoming these obstacles.

The findings also suggest that language courses should be strategically focused. For oral fluency classes, instructors should prioritize speaking activities and provide a low-stakes environment for practicing communication skills without the added pressure of mastering writing simultaneously. However, integrating a degree of writing practice might still be beneficial, provided it aligns with course objectives and addresses students' educational needs in a balanced way.

Moreover, this research invites a critical examination of technology use in language learning. Despite the participants' apparent disinterest in advanced digital tools, educators should explore innovative ways to integrate technology meaningfully. Given the global emphasis on digital literacy, incorporating technology thoughtfully could enhance learners' engagement and support their language development in a manner that feels relevant and accessible.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this action research study provided valuable insights into the complexities of second language acquisition in a multicultural classroom. It highlighted the significant influence of cultural attitudes and first-language experiences on students' learning processes, revealing both barriers and opportunities. The study emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices and the strategic focus of language instruction to maximize student outcomes.

Reflections on this research experience also underscored the value of observing and interacting with students from diverse backgrounds. The experience has profoundly shaped my approach to language teaching, emphasizing student-centered methodologies, collaborative learning activities, and ongoing assessment. Moving forward, I aim to be a facilitator rather than a traditional lecturer, creating a supportive and engaging learning environment where students can thrive. Future research should consider more personalized engagement with participants to better understand their needs and foster stronger connections.

Overall, this study reaffirms the potential of action research to inform and improve teaching practices, advocating for educators to engage in such reflective practices to enhance their professional growth and better serve their students. The journey of understanding and supporting language learners is continuous, and there remains much to explore in the intersection of culture, technology, and language education.

Competing Interests:

The author declared that there is no known competing financial and non-financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability:

The data supporting this study's findings are not openly available because the participants disagree to share their data publicly. The derived data are available upon reasonable request under restricted conditions.

Informed consent

The participants were informed about the study and gave their consent to use their responses for this study.

Declaration:

During the writing of this work the author used AI-assisted technologies for the purpose of English language polishing. The author took responsibility for the content and intended meaning of this article.

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