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# English as an International Language in Practice: Virtual Intercultural Fieldwork between Balinese and Chinese EFL Learners

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## ABSTRACT

This ‘inclusive practitioner research’ study presents a collaborative ‘virtual intercultural fieldwork’ project in which Balinese and Chinese university students communicated in English to explore similar emic cultural concepts related to the Japanese concept of *amae* (presumed indulgence); namely, *manying* (Balinese) and *sajiao* (Mandarin Chinese), through online exchanges and interviewing. The project aimed to develop and improve learners’ (including teachers) intercultural communicative competence and multiliteracies related to linguistic competence and intercultural understandings. The project also provided opportunities for the learners to use academic English in authentic situations by posing research questions and exploring methods to discover transcultural understandings through research. Applying the principles of Cultural Linguistics, Exploratory Practice, and Team Learning, the analysis of this project’s unique virtual communication element aims to inspire innovations in classroom design for teaching English as an International Language.

## KEYWORDS

English as an international language; virtual intercultural fieldwork; international collaboration; intercultural understanding

## Introduction

Globalisation brings people from various speech communities to communicate with each other and English is usually the common contact language among L2 speakers of English (Seidlhofer 2005). However, the global crisis of COVID-19 has caused xenophobic incidents to spread (Reny and Barreto 2020) and the suspension of face-to-face teaching in many cases. In line with the perspective of English as an International Language, and from a Cultural Linguistics perspective, learners need to acquire sufficient knowledge of diverse cultural conceptualisations to communicate smoothly with people from various linguistic backgrounds (Sharifian 2017).

This collaborative international project aimed to deepen the intercultural understandings between Balinese and Chinese students through the investigation of two unique, yet similar cultural concepts – *manying* (Balinese) and *sajiao* (Mandarin Chinese). *Sajiao* has been explained in academic English literature as ‘being spoiled rotten’ (see Sundararajan 2015); however, English equivalent translations of this concept cannot

entirely capture its essence. A similar counterpart of *sajiao* in Balinese is *manyang*, which was provided by the Balinese teacher (the second author) and his students. *Manja* (Indonesian) was also introduced in the investigation as it is a similar concept to *manyang* but used across Indonesia. There has been no published academic literature in English on *manyang* and *manja*, to our knowledge.

Although similar studies and projects involving online intercultural exchanges have been conducted, they have been mostly related to basic topics such as food, holidays, customs, and greetings (see O'Dowd and Lewis 2016). This project was unique in its attempt to apply Cultural Linguistics involving the mutual understanding of key emic cultural concepts in a multilingual pedagogical setting (e.g. Dalsky and Garant 2016).

Besides, what sets this project apart from the rest of similar previously published work on Online International Exchanges (OIEs) (see O'Dowd and Lewis 2016), is that the students were able to acquire the academic knowledge and skills related to their major field of study and practice academic English in addition to improving their intercultural communicative competence.

The project implemented the principles of teaching English as an International Language; namely 1) meeting the students' local needs, 2) viewing L1 as a valuable resource, 3) encouraging the students to express their own pragmatic norms, 4) developing knowledge of content schemas (McKay 2018) by incorporating Cultural Linguistics, Exploratory Practice, and Team Learning.

## Theoretical foundations of virtual intercultural fieldwork

Cultural Linguistics is an emerging multidisciplinary field that is concerned with language and cultural conceptualisations in the form of schemas, categories, and metaphors. Cultural Linguistics does not deal with objective reality; rather, it is concerned with how people talk about the imagined world (Palmer 1996). Cultural cognition results from linguistic and social interactions between space and time; as such, it involves 'enactive cognitions' that are dynamic, constantly being (re-)negotiated across generations through speech community contact (Sharifian 2017). In brief, 'Discourse creates meanings out of situations, thereby becoming "the essence of culture" and constitutive of language, culture, and society' (Sherzer 1987 as cited in Palmer 1996).

Cultural Linguistics is a discipline that 'explores the relationship between language and cultural conceptualisations' and views language as 'a memory bank' and 'a fluid vehicle' for storing and transmitting cultural cognition (Sharifian 2017). The project applied the methodology in Cultural Linguistics by focusing on the 'words that appear to be untranslatable' to find the 'culture-specific' conceptualisations (Sharifian 2017, 41).

Because some evidence has shown that L2 learners are likely to draw on the cultural cognition constructed in L1 learning while using L2 (Wolfson 1981; Odlin 1989; Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz 1990; Kasper 1992; Liu 1995; Sharifian 2009), it is important for learners to gain an understanding of the cultural conceptualisations of various cultures to reduce the risk of miscommunication (see Sharifian 2013; Xu 2017).

Adopting this perspective, the emic cultural concepts of *manyang* and *sajiao* were chosen for the project because they are closely related to daily communication and behavioural

patterns among the two speech community members. Though these two concepts share similar meanings, they are not equivalent and are thus untranslatable. It is likely to cause miscommunication if the learners interpret them from their own cultural perspectives. Moreover, these two concepts are closely related to a previous OIE project involving a similar concept in Japanese: *amae* (Dalsky and Mattig unpublished manuscript). The students were expected to investigate the nuances through comparison and contrast between these concepts by online virtual exchanges and interviewing mainly using English.

The students in this project were empowered as ‘inclusive practitioner-researchers’ following the pedagogical principles of Exploratory Practice (EP; Allwright 2003; Allwright and Hanks 2009; Hanks 2017). EP was originally proposed by Dick Allwright (2003) as an alternative approach to traditional classroom research methods such as action research (e.g. Stringer 2013) and reflective practice (e.g. Brookfield 2017). One feature of EP that distinguishes it from the two methods mentioned above is its ‘non-parasitic’ nature in that it does not impose any extra burden on the teacher(-researcher) concerning collecting data to test specific hypotheses involving a pre-/post-test or any outside observers who could potentially interfere with the educational process through their physical presence and data collection means.

In EP, the students, as ‘inclusive practitioner researchers,’ work in collaboration with the teacher-researcher(s) for the mutual understanding of classroom life. The goal is *not* to improve pedagogical methods and achieve enhanced learning outcomes. Rather, methodological improvement and greater learning outcomes are theorised to emerge as natural by-products of the mutual understandings and intercultural development of all members in the classroom.

Besides, research is embedded into the actual educational experience of the students, which is the primary feature of the pedagogy. EP does not involve a strict set of guidelines to follow in a particular order. Rather, EP features seven principles, and the teacher-researcher has the freedom to creatively apply them to best suit the classroom environment, the needs and characteristics of the students, and the learning goals. The seven principles of EP originally proposed by Allwright (2003) and clarified by Allwright and Hanks (2009, 260) are as follows:

The ‘*what*’ issues:

1. Focus on *quality of life* as the fundamental issue.
2. Work to *understand* it, before thinking about solving problems.

The ‘*who*’ issues:

3. Involve *everybody* as practitioners developing their own understandings.
4. Work to bring people *together* in a common enterprise.
5. Work cooperatively for *mutual* development.

The ‘*how*’ issues:

6. Make it a *continuous* enterprise.
7. *Minimise the burden* by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice.

Although most applications of EP are in TESOL contexts, EP can and has been successfully applied to intercultural learning projects; for example, online intercultural exchanges of

students studying in Japan and Finland (Dalsky and Garant 2016) and Japan and Germany (Dalsky and Mattig unpublished manuscript). The project extended this line of virtual intercultural fieldwork for teaching English as an International Language.

In addition to EP, the teacher-researchers collaborated with the student-researcher participants by applying the theoretical principles of Team Learning (TL; Tajino and Tajino 2000; Tajino and Smith 2015; Stewart, Dalsky, and Tajino 2019). The origins of TL can be traced back to observations of the issues faced by English L1 speakers who engage in co-teaching /team-teaching with Japanese teachers of English in Japanese primary and secondary schools in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, which was established in 1987.

Tajino and Tajino (2000) reconceptualised the notion of team teaching by emphasising learning processes rather than teaching processes in the JET programme and similar programmes involving the co-teaching of languages. Tajino and Tajino essentially argue that *team teaching* should best be conceptualised as *team learning*, a situation in which the pedagogical endeavour includes all the participants as *learners* of the same team. In this case, each member of the team is learning from one another, regardless of differences related to L1, nationality, age, or status. TL has recently been theoretically revised to include many variations including a value-centred model (Tajino and Smith 2015), and a series of steps involved in TL's potential for TESOL practice (Stewart, Dalsky, and Tajino 2019).

TL was used in the project as all the participants were learning from each other as members of the same research team. The teachers were learning from other teachers, the students were learning from other students, and the teachers were learning from the students about issues related to emic cultural concepts in the students' respective L1.

## Methods

Three undergraduate students majoring in psychology from a small university in Bali, Indonesia, participated as a part of the course requirements for a *Qualitative Research Methodology* seminar taught by a Balinese lecturer (the second author). Six mainland Chinese participated as part of the course requirements for an *Intercultural Understanding Pedagogy* graduate seminar at a large national research university in Japan taught by a US American associate professor (the fourth author) with a mainland Chinese doctoral student teaching assistant (the first author), fluent in Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, and English. The students were divided into two teams with three Chinese students and one or two Balinese students to engage in virtual intercultural fieldwork.

The Balinese students mainly interviewed the students in Japan, as the students in Bali were enrolled in a qualitative methods course. With teacher guidance, the student-researchers attempted to explore their own research questions about emic cultural concepts through online intercultural interviews and to improve their intercultural communicative competence in the process.

The basic task of the Balinese students in the seminar was to practice engaging in open-ended interviews with a grounded perspective to identify local Balinese concepts that could be compared/contrasted with the emic Japanese concept of *amae*. *Amae* was chosen because there is a relative abundance of academic literature on the topic and it is argued to be a key concept for understanding the Japanese (Dalsky and Su 2020; Doi [1971] 1981). Therefore, *amae* was used as a starting point as an example of an emic cultural concept that has been investigated. Students from Bali were given explanations

and some literature related to the meaning and expression of *amae* in Japanese culture (e.g. Yamaguchi 2004). Preparation details for the intercultural exchange in the seminar at the Balinese university were as follows:

- (1) Materials of qualitative research methods and *amae* (e.g. Dalsky n.d.) were introduced and explained by their Balinese teacher.
- (2) Open interviews with participants from Bali were conducted to find concepts in the Balinese language which have relatively analogous meanings to *amae*. This process resulted in the word *manyang* emerging in the Balinese language.
- (3) The interview transcripts were then analysed by applying coding techniques and categorisation. The results of the analysis were then arranged in a conclusion and became the subject of discussions with the mainland Chinese students in Kyoto. The Balinese students were also given the freedom to convey the meaning of *manyang* within their own folk psychology understandings; that is, common sense understandings (see Bruner 1990), regardless of the results of their interview research.
- (4) In the online exchange with the mainland Chinese students, the Balinese students also re-applied the principles of open interviewing to find local meanings of concepts in Mandarin Chinese (*sajiao*; Sundararajan 2015) that were analogous to *manyang*.
- (5) After the online intercultural exchanges, Balinese students wrote reflection papers that included conclusions of the comparison/contrast of the meanings of *manyang* and *sajiao*.

The Chinese students were enrolled in the Intercultural Understanding Pedagogy course, which aimed to implement a method of intercultural understanding pedagogy through intercultural exchanges that deepen mutual understanding of cultures through the concepts; namely, *amae*, *sajiao*, and *manyang*.

The task for the Chinese students was to first learn about the philosophical foundations, theories, practice, and methods related to the pedagogical design involving intercultural exchanges in an inclusive research practitioner paradigm by reading, presenting, and discussing the academic materials. Then the students were assigned to read academic articles written in English distributed by the teacher about emic cultural concepts to learn how to investigate and analyse the concepts as a researcher. They were expected to generate research questions ('puzzles' in EP terms) about the concepts which would help them to engage in conversations during the intercultural exchanges with Balinese students.

Before the intercultural exchanges, the Balinese and Chinese students were assigned to read materials on *amae* (Yamaguchi 2004; Niiya, Ellsworth, and Yamaguchi 2006) and one book chapter on *sajiao* (Sundararajan 2015). The reason for first introducing the Japanese counterpart of *manyang/manja* and *sajiao* was due to the lack of academic research on *manyang/manja* and *sajiao* compared to the relatively large amount of research on *amae*.

Another reason was that the Chinese students had likely experienced or were familiar with *amae* as they had been living in Japan for some time and they had an intermediate or advanced level of Japanese. In other words, their folk psychological knowledge (see Bruner 1990) of *amae* could stimulate further ideas to inform discussions regarding the other two concepts.

Furthermore, through reading and discussing the studies on *amae*, the students were able to 1) learn about the related theories and research methods applied in psychology related to the concept, and 2) pose puzzles about the cultural concepts. The process of generating puzzles was essential for the project, as it is through exploring through the puzzles that they could improve and broaden understandings (Hanks 2017).

The following is a selection of some of the puzzles raised by the students:

- (1) ***Universal and cultural-specific aspects of the concepts:*** ‘The paper mentioned *amae* actions that happen among Japanese children. Is it true that *Amae* is something inborn and universal but developed as a social skill uniquely in Japan?’
- (2) ***Definitions of the concepts:*** ‘I’m feeling confused about how we could define an “appropriate” or “inappropriate” action [in *amae*’s definition].’
- (3) ***Formation of the concepts:*** ‘China is a society that emphasizes interdependence, but *Amae* or *Sajiao* is not a vital concept in Chinese psychology. Do such phenomena have something to do with the social hierarchy?’
- (4) ***Features of the concepts:*** ‘How do you know someone is *Amae-ing*? What sentences will you use? In what way will you say them?’
- (5) ***Present observations about the concepts:*** ‘Do you think you are good at *Amae*? Do you like people who do *Amae* a lot?’ ‘Do the Indonesian people think *Amae/Sajiao* is good for building and maintaining relationships?’ ‘Do people have different attitudes toward different types of *manja*?’

The following methods of how students explored the puzzles in the intercultural exchanges were observed:

- (1) *Sharing personal experiences.* For example, the Balinese students and Chinese students shared the same episode of asking their mother to cook food for themselves by using a different tone, even though they could do it on their own, which lead to the discovery of a universal aspect of *many-ing* and *sajiao*;
- (2) *Discussing individual observations and beliefs.* For example, the Balinese students stated that it is more acceptable for females to do *many-ing* because males are expected to bear more responsibility as a household leader, which was also observed by the Chinese students regarding *sajiao*.
- (3) *Referring to the mediatorial concept.* For example, the Chinese students quoted the cases of *amae* from the reading materials and their observations and asked if these cases are applicable to the concepts in Balinese culture;
- (4) *Examining the differences of related intracultural concepts.* For example, the Balinese students were asked to clarify the differences between *manja* and *many-ing*, which facilitated the understandings of the concepts (i.e. *manja* for a general context; *many-ing* for a family context).

The above methods effectively served to explore the puzzles and more details of the findings are covered in the next section.



## Results

Each team of Balinese and Chinese students (Team A and Team B) was assigned to write a research paper using a collaborative online word processor (i.e. Google Docs) that compared and contrasted *amae*, *manyīng/manja*, and *sājiao*. The structure of the paper (as follows) was provided by the teacher before the online exchanges to guide the fieldwork, and the students could modify the structure based on their findings:

- (1) Introduction
- (2) Concept 1: definition, functions, and cases
- (3) Concept 2: definition, functions, and cases
- (4) Concept 3: definition, functions, and cases
- (5) Conclusion
- (6) References
- (7) Discussion questions

The findings of the students on the similarities and differences between these concepts through virtual intercultural fieldwork are presented in the following sections. Informed consent from the students was received to anonymously share their papers (some of which are published on [interculturalwordssensei.org](http://interculturalwordssensei.org)) and reflections.

The definitions of the three concepts provided by the two teams are as follows:

### (1) **Manyīng/Manja:**

‘Manja’ and ‘Manyīng’ are two words used to describe one’s expectation of other’s favour. ... The former one ‘Manja’ is suitable in describing any type of relationship; however, the latter one ‘Manyīng’ only represents the *Amae* between parents and their kids. (Team A)

Manja is a Javanese word, which can be defined as a behaviour or an attitude or action of someone who needs extra attention or affection from his or her inner circle. It is often used when we are able to do something, but want others to do it for us. (Team B)

### (2) **Sājiao:**

Sājiao is a Chinese word used to describe someone’s spoilt childlike action. (Team A)

Sājiao can be defined as a series of actions to act childish and cute to someone else. (Team B)

### (3) **Amae:**

The two teams quoted the definitions proposed by Doi (1992) and Yamaguchi (1999). In terms of the similarities among the concepts:

The three concepts share a similarity that initiator uses a series of adorable actions or words to request for a favour or comfort from his or her family, close friend or lover. (Team B)

Most requests are inappropriate. (Team A)



The similarities in functions and cases among the concepts could be addressed as:

- (1) the relationship between the actor and the object is close or extremely close, in most of the situations (Team A) and always happening in close relationships (Team B);
- (2) behavioural strategies can also be similar among them (Team A).

Tables 1 and 2 show a summary of the differences described above among these concepts according to the participants (student-researchers):

**Table 1.** Differences among *manying/manja*, *sajiao*, and *amae* (Team A).

	manying/manja	sajiao	amae
Self as the receiver			✓
Stranger as the receiver	✓	✓	
Pet as the receiver	✓		✓
Males as the actor			✓

**Table 2.** Differences among *manying/manja*, *sajiao*, and *amae* (Team B).

	manying/manja	sajiao	amae
Males as the actor	✓	--	✓
Regardless of age	✓		✓
Presumed acceptance		✓	✓
Harm from rejection		✓	✓

## Discussion

The findings of the students reveal that though the concepts do share some similarities, there are some differences, which could be essentially thought of as lost in translation. In particular, Tables 1 and 2 show a seemingly contradictory result from the aspect of whether males will engage in *manying/manja* or *sajiao*, which in fact demonstrates that the cultural conceptualisations are heterogeneously distributed among the speech communities. This interesting finding can also serve as a stimulus for students to generate puzzles in future intercultural fieldwork, which is in line with one of the principles of Exploratory Practice (i.e. *Make the work a continuous enterprise*). The overall findings contained abundant folk psychology knowledge about the emic cultural concepts, which fills major gaps in the limited literature of empirical data on *manying/manja* and *sajiao*.

Moreover, through discussions of the emic cultural concepts: *amae*, *manying/manja*, and *sajiao*, the Balinese and Chinese students were able to develop intercultural understandings comprehensively. The Japanese concept *amae* was first introduced in the project to provide possible research dimensions based on academic materials for further research in the similar Balinese and Chinese concepts. Through the introduction of the third-party Japanese concept *amae*, the Balinese and Chinese concepts were discussed from a more objective perspective, which helped to avoid the opposite emotions towards each other's culture. Besides, the authentic communication, albeit virtual, also

contributed to developing a mindset of not projecting the unfamiliar speech community as a homogeneous group. As one of the Chinese students wrote in her reflections on the project:

I think I gained a lot from the process of communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. It's like a trip, where you broaden your horizons, get to know some different indigenous psychological phenomena, cultural traditions, and see opinions from different perspectives. And the experience also let me know the variety inside the culture. Our Balinese partners were two girls and they were totally different types. One of them was very talkative and enthusiastic, which was in line with my 'stereotype' of Balinese's personality, but the other was much quieter and calmer.

This reflection provides some evidence to show that virtual intercultural fieldwork enables the participants to engage in authentic communication with real people and the interaction itself, is beneficial to a more comprehensive intercultural development. They were also able to be aware of contexts within the cultural concepts using daily life metaphors to further describe the meanings. This is important to be noticed since context is embedded in culture. The creation of metaphors usually would consider the types of context and contextual factors that make them up (Kövecses 2017).

Furthermore, by researching the specific cases of the concepts manifested in daily life including language expressions following the standpoint of Cultural Linguistics, the students were able to develop a deeper understanding of not only the cultural meanings but also intercultural communicative competence including multiliteracies.

For example, in one *sajiao* case illustrated in the collaborative paper written by one of the teams in English, a girl felt lazy to go out for a meal and called her friend for taking out some bread and salad to her dormitory. She asked '... could you do me that favour? Plea~~~~~se? ~~~~~ I'll buy you juice then.' In this request, the cute tone used by the *sajiao* actor was represented by the tilde symbol '~'. It explicitly points out the multimodal features of request practices, which are lengthening or higher pitch in speech, and meaning-making of punctuation in writing. The tilde symbol is transferred to English in this case because it is common usage in informal digital communication in Chinese. Receivers who are not familiar with such usage may mistake the intention of the actors. By explicitly presenting different patterns of meaning-making and investigating the cultural implications, the students raised their awareness of the possible cultural factors framing communication, and developed multiliteracies regarding the ability to identify and interpret multimodal meanings in speech acts (e.g. request). It demonstrated the significance of embracing real-life informal communication and appreciating cultural and linguistic diversity for teaching English as an International Language, which is in accordance with the aim of multiliteracies pedagogy (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Kalantzis and Cope 2012; Mills 2005, 2009).

Another important aspect that contributed to the success of the project was that the study applied Exploratory Practice and Team Learning. Both approaches proposed an equal and cooperative status among students and teachers, which encouraged the students to express their understandings of the concepts freely. Taking the same example as above, imagine if the teacher immediately corrected the uncommon usage of '~' in English – denying the changing nature of English; the students who are not familiar with such usage would have lost their opportunities to learn. Moreover, the two approaches fit in the context that only limited literature is available for research involving the concepts.

Additionally, the Balinese students had the opportunity to practice qualitative inquiry using English in an international setting. According to the reflections written by the Balinese students, although they experienced the uncertainty of communicating in English, confusion about an unfamiliar culture, and shyness in meeting strangers due to lack of international experience, they managed to overcome the obstacles by using text messaging to assist communication, asking questions about unknown words, and making a conscious effort to manage their nervousness. Besides, they were able to practice and improve their academic English language skills and experience various technical issues related to conducting qualitative research virtually, for example, lags during video calls and time differences.

## Limitations

Although the answers to the *amae*-related puzzles were not all discovered, and despite the fact no Japanese students were available to participate in the project (and this is certainly one limitation), the two teams still provided informative insights on these concepts from both an insider and an outsider perspective. Besides, the students had acknowledged some typical realisations of these concepts in language. For example, these concepts share a similar feature in that they all can be found in the speech act of requests. However, due to the limited time and relatively sparse literature published on *manying/manja* and *sajiao*, the specific request strategies related to these concepts were not able to be systematically investigated in this study. Indeed, this is one of the limitations that will be addressed in further virtual intercultural fieldwork regarding these Indonesian emic concepts by using some of the written materials produced by the students and having the Indonesian teachers recommend some possible relevant references written in their L1.

## Conclusion

As shown above, virtual intercultural fieldwork could produce positive outcomes in offering multifaceted folk psychology knowledge on cultural concepts, enhancing intercultural understandings and intercultural communicative competence of students, and improving corresponding research skills and academic English competence. The implications are that the virtual intercultural fieldwork could be implemented in intercultural training or English teaching settings in an innovative multilingual manner through the L1s of the participants.

This study applied the principles of teaching English as an International Language, which has the potential to encompass various cultural conceptualisations in a Cultural Linguistics framework (Sharifian 2017). Moreover, through the process of what we propose as ‘virtual intercultural fieldwork,’ the design of the study implemented the principles of Exploratory Practice (Hanks 2017), and Team Learning (Stewart, Dalsky, and Tajino 2019). As globalisation continues to spread, learners have more and more opportunities to use English in intercultural encounters. Furthermore, it is important for practitioners not only to develop learners’ communicative competence but also to encourage them to establish a confident identity towards their cultures and an inclusive attitude towards people from unfamiliar cultures. This study attempted to demonstrate that even in a virtual environment, this is indeed a reality.

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