

# **A Critical Review on Informal Digital Learning of English: Key to Develop Intercultural Awareness For EFL Students**

Surya Agung Wijaya<sup>1)</sup>  
Indonesia, Universitas Negeri Semarang  
e-mail : [saw@students.unnes.ac.id](mailto:saw@students.unnes.ac.id)

## **Abstract**

Looking for overseas job opportunities can be done at home right now. However, it requires English and communication skills. Communication skills with various people need speakers' awareness of intercultural, for instance, how students handle miscommunication, different cultural background, and their openness. Nevertheless, promoting intercultural awareness (ICA) in class for English as foreign language (EFL) students may face many challenges because EFL students mostly have limited access to English and intercultural speakers in their schools. In response to this situation, this study attempts to promote ICA through the Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) concept. Many studies on IDLE reported that students who had participated in IDLE activities developed their willingness to communicate in English and developed cross-cultural understanding. However, there was scant evidence on IDLE continuum model, including in-class, extracurricular, and extramural with a specific design for ICA. Conceptually, in-class IDLE attempts to promote the theory, concept, and practice of essential IDLE and cultural awareness. During extracurricular IDLE, students shift from theory into practice to develop their advanced IDLE and cultural awareness, but teachers still monitor this stage. Finally, extramural IDLE expects that students who develop ICA could initiate and design their own IDLE activities to continue their IDLE activities and empower their ICA. The pedagogical will also be discussed.

**Keywords:** Extracurricular IDLE; Extramural IDLE; In-class IDLE, Informal Digital Learning of English, Intercultural Awareness

## **Introduction**

Culture and language are intertwined areas. When EFL students learn language, they also know cultural context beyond English language. With advance technology, communicating with various people from other counties can be done in social media. Where scholars recently give more attention to this research area called informal digital learning of English (IDLE) proposed by Ju Seong Lee, students show more willing to speak English (Lee & Drajati, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2021; Lee et al., 2021, 2022; Liu et al., 2024; Taherian et al., 2023; Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2023). When students interact with people from different background cultures, English plays essential roles to facilitate cultural exchanges. Interestingly,

the way of students' communication is also affected by background cultures.

Moreover, English has become language to unite various interlocutors of languacultures (Baker, 2011). Therefore, EFL students' ICA plays essential roles when they practice communicating in English with multiple speakers from inner, outer, and expanding circles. EFL teachers attempt to promote intercultural through productive activity, including telecollaboration (Liu et al., 2023a; Yeh & Heng, 2023) and digital storytelling (Jao et al., 2023), and receptive activity, such as analyzing video (Chao, 2013; Susilo et al., 2023). However, without intervention from EFL teachers, EFL students' ICA was found insufficient to help them communicate (Genç, 2018). Moreover, students who do not learn English perform

poorer than EFL students (Vajak et al., 2021). Therefore, teachers need strategies to help students to communicate in English and build their ICA.

Promoting ICA to EFL students is not easy for EFL teachers because students still struggle with their English skills and are unwilling to communicate in English with their classmates and teachers during in-class activities. High affective filters (e.g., high anxiety, low motivation, high pressure, and no long-term goal) primarily affect students because they are afraid to make mistakes. This condition worsens when EFL teachers use corrective feedback (e.g., revising mispronunciation immediately). Interestingly, studies in IDLE provide evidence of intercultural competence that can be integrated with IDLE activities (Liu et al., 2023b; Rezai, 2023). Although there is empirical studies on IDLE and intercultural, scant evidence regarding conceptual design is available by interweaving ICA and Lee's (2022) IDLE continuum concepts. Therefore, based on the body of literature, this study conceptually promotes a design to

encourage EFL students' ICA through IDLE.

### **What is intercultural awareness?**

Baker (2011) defined ICA as "a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices, and frames of understanding can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context-specific manner in real-time communication" (p. 5). Therefore, ICA requires students to practice productive activities, not only receptive ones, to implement their intercultural knowledge, attitude, and skill.

ICA is conceptually based on prior model of Byram's (1997) intercultural communication competence framework, including intercultural knowledge, attitude, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Then, Baker (2011) narrowed down his idea to ICA, which had three layers of intercultural awareness (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Baker's (2011, pp. 5-6) intercultural awareness model*

<b>Intercultural awareness model</b>	<b>Macro parameters</b>	<b>Micro parameters</b>
Level 1-Basic cultural awareness	basic understanding of cultural contexts in communication,	An awareness of: culture as a set of shared behaviors, beliefs, and values; the role culture and context play in any interpretation of meaning; our own culturally induced behavior, values, and beliefs and the ability to articulate this; others' culturally induced behavior, values, and beliefs and the ability to compare this with our own culturally induced behavior, values, and beliefs.
Level 2-Advanced cultural awareness	more complex understanding of language and culture	An awareness of: the relative nature of cultural norms; cultural understanding as provisional and open to revision; multiple voices or perspectives within any cultural grouping;

		individuals as members of many social groupings including cultural ones; common ground between specific cultures as well as an awareness of possibilities for mismatch and miscommunication between specific cultures.
Level 3-Intercultural awareness	fluid, hybrid, and emergent understanding of cultures and languages in intercultural communication needed for English used in global settings	An awareness of: culturally based frames of reference, forms, and communicative practices as being related both to specific cultures and also as emergent and hybrid in intercultural communication; initial interaction in intercultural communication as possibly based on cultural stereotypes or generalizations but an ability to move beyond these through: a capacity to negotiate and mediate between different emergent socioculturally grounded communication modes and frames of reference based on the above understanding of culture in intercultural communication.

Those frameworks Byram (1997) and Baker (2011) attempt to consciously acknowledge EFL students to a culture where they understand their own culture (local and national cultures) and other cultures. Therefore, their attitude toward languacultures develops, becoming open, respectful, and value. Moreover, those concepts also expect students to communicate authentically with other English speakers from inner, outer, and expanding circles in complex settings. However, EFL students in some areas may have limited access to communicating with English speakers in complex settings. Moreover, some schools with international teachers may promote intercultural to students.

Having intercultural program, EFL students have adaptability, mutual respect, identity preservation, and communication skills and interaction (Liu et al., 2023a). However, EFL students predominantly suffer from critical cultural awareness (Valencia & Benavides, 2018). Therefore, to achieve missing goal, Alghasab and Alvares-Ayure (2021) suggested EFL

teachers promote intercultural awareness by focusing on critical aspects. However, not all EFL learners can access intercultural speakers daily. Therefore, how can teachers accommodate EFL students' needs?

### **Informal Digital Learning of English's Continuum Model**

IDLE was conceptualized by Prof Ju Seong Lee in 2017 from the Education University of Hong Kong where he proposed IDLE as students' "self-directed English activities in informal digital settings, motivated by personal interests and undertaken independently without being assessed by a teacher" (Lee & Lee, 2021, p. 359). He interweaved three fundamental theories – incidental language learning (Schmidt, 1994), learner autonomy (Benson, 2013; Holec, 1981), and informal language learning (Benson, 2011) to build IDLE. There are other terms to refer to IDLE, for example, Sockett's work on online informal learning of English (OILE) and Toffoli's out-of-classroom language learning

(OCLL) (Toffoli, 2020). Still, all of them were under the umbrella of naturalistic computer-assisted language learning (CALL).

Moreover, IDLE is divided into two categories, such as receptive IDLE activity (RIA) and productive IDLE activity (PIA) (Lee & Drajati, 2019). First, RIA emphasized watching, listening, and reading from various IDLE platforms (e.g., English vlogs, music, podcasts, blogs, magazines, newspapers, etc.). Second, PIA employs students to write and speak on various IDLE platforms (e.g., interaction with multiple interlocutors on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tandem, Bottled, Ablo, Speaky, Discord, etc.). Therefore, this study attempts to construct those activities to benefit students' ICA. Moreover, Lee (2022) proposed IDLE's three continuum model, including "in-class, extracurricular, and extramural" IDLE, so that students can learn seamless English language from formal to informal and vice versa.

### ***In-class promoting IDLE***

To promote IDLE in in-class activities, it is designed based on "other-directed and structured" (Benson, 2011) by EFL teachers. Some students may already be familiar with IDLE, but others may avoid it because they feel English is a complex language. After all, students stereotype when learning grammar and structure. When students have low English proficiency and lack vocabulary, teachers must provide them with rich input in

English. However, teachers may not use traditional method, drilling method. However, inviting students to become familiar with various English tools may help them, such as video games, social media, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tandem, Bottled, Ablo, Speaky, Discord, etc. Moreover, teachers may need to analyze their students and IDLE tools before implementing their students.

Why do EFL teachers need to introduce IDLE in the classroom? Students need to be acknowledged for their IDLE learning goals, strategies, and evaluation because IDLE provides distributive learning environments where students lose their learning focus. Moreover, to take advantage of incidental language learning (Schmidt, 1994) and learner autonomy (Benson, 2013; Holec, 1981), some students may not automatically or magically build self-directed learning that they design their own IDLE activities for learning English. Therefore, this study proposes that teachers must help students design IDLE goals, rubrics, timetables, and assessments during in-class. However, they should be simply designed so that students can operate and create their own models. EFL Teachers can illustrate this through students' daily diaries (see Figure 1). Moreover, EFL teachers can create Figure 1 with their students, so students know what they want and what they will do with Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*EFL students' IDLE daily diary*

My daily story, date: _____	
I want to learn _____, and my goal is _____. My learning media is _____ and I meet my friends from other countries. My friends are _____. They are _____ to help me learn English. I spend _____ hours to communicate with them. I can judge that my English now is _____. So, I will improve by _____.	

### ***How to Promote IDLE into In-class Activities?***

In Promoting IDLE media, EFL teachers can select based on school's syllabus and learning objective, so they will not collide with school policy. For example, if their students lack high-frequency vocabulary, they can start with daily conversation topics related to culture. For instance, teachers show videos about people from different countries' table manners, but all of them are explained in English by speakers from inner, outer, and expanding circles. Then, teachers introduce various applications (e.g., Tandem and Bottled) to students so that they can choose to interact with multiple people from different countries. Although teachers may teach more than one application, it is suggested that it be limited when students practice so they will not manipulate their experiences. Therefore, teachers must train before students. Moreover, teachers can explain the benefits and potential of harm so that students can avoid bad situations during interactions.

Teachers may make a roleplay activity by peering students with other classmates to practice before students use application. For example, peers ask each other what types of food are usually eaten at home?, how do their family eat?, how does noble family eat?, etc. Then, teachers invite students to look for overseas friends to talk about table manners in different countries. At the end of the class, students reflect by writing in Figure 1 about their English, cultural, and intercultural experience activities from in-class and using applications. Moreover, teachers create extracurricular IDLEs to follow up on in-class activities.

### ***Extracurricular IDLE***

Extracurricular IDLE is "semi-structured, self-instructed, and self-directed" English learning activities utilizing online informal environments for in-class tasks that EFL students can conduct after school (Benson, 2011; Lee, 2019). Teachers played a role in giving learning objectives

for IDLE activities, including intercultural skills.

During extracurricular IDLE, students can continue looking for and interacting with speakers from inner, outer, and expanding circles. Teachers must give various topics that students should discuss with their friends, for example, greetings, holidays, festivals, traditional clothing, music, dance, family tradition, school life, films, television, sports, etc. Teachers need to find more familiar topics with students' daily activities for basic cultural awareness, but they can go to more complex issues for advanced cultural awareness. To monitor the authentication of conversation, teachers may be required to provide picture of the interaction on their dairy based on Figure 1. Teachers may employ this extracurricular IDLE for two weeks or more, so students can create portfolios based on their diaries. Moreover, teachers can assess students' performance based on portfolios regarding their writing based on Figure 1. Furthermore, teachers can create a spoken diary where students must record their daily diaries after conducting extracurricular IDLE.

### ***Extramural IDLE***

Extramural IDLE is "unstructured, naturalistic, and self-directed" (Benson, 2011), so students have more freedom to choose what media will be used, who their friends are, and which long-term goal do they want to achieve. After two weeks or a month in extracurricular IDLE, students may already develop friendships with their friends from inner, outer, and expanding circles. Building friendships from acquaintance to friend, they continue their interaction without any intervention from teachers. Moreover, students are expected to develop their motivation for learning English, enjoy it, and experience low anxiety (Lee & Xie, 2023). During this stage, students need to know their long-term learning goals and what they want to achieve by participating in IDLE

activities. For example, they can use Bottled to improve their writing fluency. Moreover, if they are willing to speak English fluently, they can use Ome.tv. Furthermore, teachers can casually ask their students after extracurricular IDLE if they continue communicating with their overseas friends.

IDLE provides naturalistic setting so that students can experience and face various cultures. Moreover, students need to master their own culture because their friends will also ask questions about culture in exchange for their questions about other cultures. Therefore, they can find similarities and differences between students' cultures and other cultures. Reflecting on my culture as Indonesian compared to other cultures, Indonesians, especially Javanese, may ask private area to stranger at general transportation as a part of their politeness, for example, "Where do you from?"

### **ICA-IDLE framework**

This paper promotes the notion of ICA-IDLE, as seamless learning of English and intercultural. Therefore, EFL teachers should carefully design the degree of learning culture and English.

In the first stage, In-class promoting intercultural through IDLE, EFL teachers focus on fostering cultural concepts explicitly taught using English as a means of communication. Students need

#### ***Building knowledge***

1. learning about their culture from basic to advanced culture in the literature (e.g., book, video, interview with local older people, etc.)
2. reflecting their practice to know how far their understanding of their own culture (e.g., video reflection in English)
3. learning about various cultures, from basic to advance culture, in the literature (e.g., book, video, interview with older local people, etc.)
4. reflecting their practice to know how far their understanding of their other culture (e.g., video reflection in English)

5. empowering students' intercultural theory and concept, for example, promote Byram's (1997) ICC model

*Engaging attitude*

1. practicing intercultural topics in forum group discussion
2. reflecting their openness toward their own and other cultures

*Practicing skills*

1. practicing in English with peers about intercultural topics
2. practicing with intercultural speakers in various applications (e.g., video games, social media, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tandem, Bottled, Ablo, Speaky, Discord, etc.)
3. reflecting their out-of-class practices, for example, experiencing miscommunication, limited English skills, mediating different culture

In the second stage, ICA, under extracurricular IDLE design, EFL students explored cultural tasks using English to communicate. When in-class promoting and shaping students' initial intercultural knowledge, attitude, and skill, EFL students can build their advanced culture. Teachers may promote advanced topics (e.g., feminism, conflict resolution, effect of using technology on their culture, Z generation, etc.) that students must discuss with their intercultural speakers. However, if they think their students need essential culture, they can go into more daily topics. Therefore, EFL students do not feel overwhelmed with information and increase their affective filter. EFL teachers need to evaluate enjoyment of their extracurricular program because it is one of significant factors in students' willingness to learn English and culture.

In the third stage, extramural IDLE for ICA, students independently learn English and incidentally learn culture. In the disruptive environment of IDLE, students may not intentionally learn language. Interestingly, EFL students find themselves that they can write and speak

English after they use IDLE because Learning in IDLE is mostly incidental. Therefore, in-class and extracurricular are critical stages for extramural IDLE to empower self-directed learning because EFL teachers acknowledge the advantages, learning goals, and learning outputs. ICA-IDLE explicitly proposes being "intercultural" in IDLE because students may naturally develop language over culture, although language and culture are intertwined. Therefore, this paper expects EFL students to design their own activities for intercultural awareness, for instance, in the case of online gamers.

Gamers can play video games (e.g., MMORPG, open world, turn base game, etc.), providing story elements. This paper recommends Genshin Impact because it has cultural elements from various countries, such as China, Germany, Japan, the Middle East, and France. Those cultural elements are implemented in buildings, food, items, names, clothes, stories, etc. However, this video game is fiction and receptive. EFL students can develop their cultural reading habits and skills in this stage. Therefore, EFL students need to go to community. By interacting with various people in community, EFL students may clarify cultural elements with other intercultural speakers.

Written English activities include negotiation via chat groups (e.g., Discord), personal chat (WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.), and spoken activities such as playing games and synchronous communication in Discord. Students who have similar interests with low affective filters feel more comfortable and willing to communicate with intercultural speakers. However, naturally, this process requires long time to achieve students' ICA-IDLE because students' purposes in extramural IDLE are not "learning". However, EFL students enjoy their IDLE contents and incidentally learn English and culture. ICA-IDLE empowers culture to be more

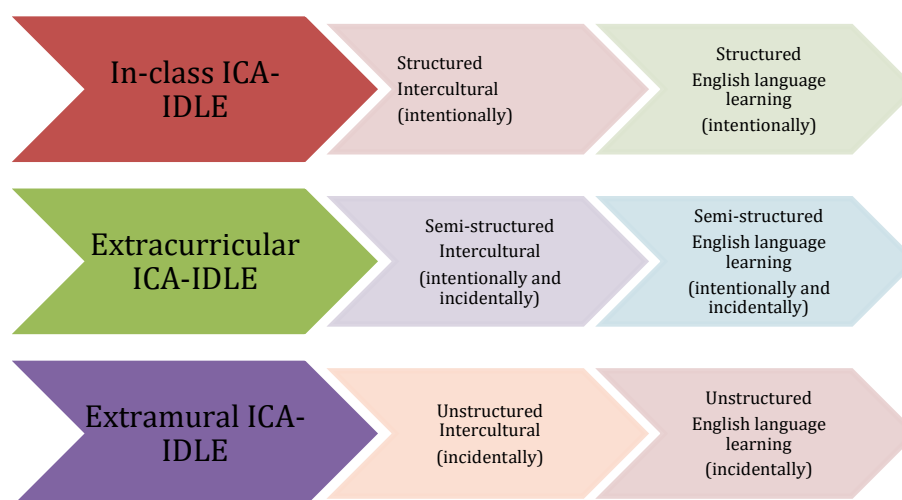
explicit; they learn English through negotiation process on cultures.

### Conclusion

This paper aims to interweave ICA into IDLE elements to empower students' ICA because culture and language are interconnected discussions. ICA acknowledges cultural aspects of learning English. When EFL students return to their local and national communities, they can still implement their international knowledge in their community because local and national communities also provide cultural diversities. For instance, Indonesia has various ethnicities, cultures, and religions. Students' openness toward

multiple backgrounds can help students respect and collaborate. Moreover, most EFL students lack English input in the classroom. For instance, Indonesian schools only teach English for 2 hours, so students' English input is limited. On the other hand, the body of literature on IDLE shows students acquiring high and low-frequency language. Therefore, EFL students can benefit from their English language proficiency. In ICA-IDLE, the degree of learning culture became point of departure from IDLE (see Figure 1). Furthermore, this study is still limited in conceptual stage, so future studies may use and implement this idea into empirical studies with rigorous methodology.

**Figure 1**  
ICA-IDLE concept



### References

- Alghasab, M., & Alvarez-ayure, C. P. (2021). Towards the promotion of intercultural competencies: Telecollaborative conversations between Kuwaiti and Colombian English as a foreign language university students. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 0(0), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1934483>
- Baker, W. (2011). From cultural awareness to intercultural awareness: Culture in ELT. *ELT journal*, 66(1), 62–70. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccr017>
- Benson, P. (2011). Language learning and teaching beyond the classroom: An introduction to the field. In P. Benson & H. Reinders (Eds.), *Beyond the language classroom: The theory and practice of informed language learning and teaching* (pp. 7–16). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Benson, P. (2013). Learner autonomy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(4), 839–843. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.134>



- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Chao, T. C. (2013). A diary study of university EFL learners' intercultural learning through foreign films. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 26(3), 247-265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2013.833936>
- Genç, G. (2018). Are Turkish EFL pre-service teachers ready to manage intercultural challenges?. *Intercultural Education*, 29(2), 185-202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2018.1429790>
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Pergamon Press.
- Jao, C. Y., Chen, C. H., & Yeh, H. C. (2023). Exploring the effects of cross-cultural collaborating on bilingual digital storytelling on students' intercultural learning. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2023.2286386>
- Lee, J. S. (2019). Quantity and diversity of informal digital learning of English. *Language Learning and Technology*, 23(1), 114-126. <https://doi.org/10.125/44675>
- Lee, J. S. (2022). *Informal digital learning of English: Research to practice*. Routledge.
- Lee, J. S., & Dražati, N. A. (2019). Affective variables and informal digital learning of English: Keys to willingness to communicate in a second language. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 35(5), 168-182. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.5177>
- Lee, J. S., & Lee, K. (2021). The role of informal digital learning of English and L2 motivational self system in foreign language enjoyment. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 52(1), 358-373. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12955>
- Lee, J. S., & Xie, Q. (2023). Profiling the affective characteristics of EFL learners' digital informal learning: A person-centered approach. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 17(3), 552-566. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2022.2085713>
- Lee, J. S., Xie, Q., & Lee, K. (2021). Informal digital learning of English and L2 willingness to communicate: roles of emotions, gender, and educational stage. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 45(2), 596-612. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2021.1918699>
- Lee, J. S., Yeung, N. M., & Osburn, M. B. (2022). Foreign Language Enjoyment as a mediator between Informal Digital Learning of English and willingness to communicate: a sample of Hong Kong EFL secondary students. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2112587>
- Liu, G. L., Zhang, Y., & Zhang, R. (2024). Examining the relationships among motivation, informal digital learning of English, and foreign language enjoyment: An explanatory mixed-method study. *ReCALL*, 36(1), 72-88. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344023000204>
- Liu, G. Z., Fathi, J., & Rahimi, M. (2023a). Enhancing EFL learners' intercultural communicative effectiveness through telecollaboration with native and non-native speakers of English. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 1-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2022.2164778>
- Liu, G., Ma, C., Bao, J., & Liu, Z. (2023b). Toward a model of informal digital learning of English and intercultural competence: A large-scale structural equation modeling approach. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 0(0), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2023.2191652>
- Rezai, A. (2023). Investigating the association of informal digital learning of English with EFL learners' intercultural competence and willingness to communicate: a SEM study. *BMC psychology*, 11(1), 314.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-023-01365-2>

- Schmidt, R. (1994). Deconstructing consciousness in search of useful definitions for applied linguistics. *AILA Review*, 11, 11-26.
- Susilo, A., Yang, P., & Qi, R. (2023). Developing critical intercultural awareness through video clip-assisted intercultural tasks. *Higher Education Pedagogies*, 8(1), 2235337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2023.2235337>
- Taherian, T., Shirvan, M. E., Yazdanmehr, E., Kruk, M., & Pawlak, M. (2023). A longitudinal analysis of informal digital learning of English, willingness to communicate and foreign language boredom: a latent change score mediation model. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 0(0), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-023-00751-z>
- Toffoli, D. (2020). *Informal learning and institution-wide language provision universities and language learners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vajak, M., Izadpanah, S., & Naserian, J. (2021). The assessment of intercultural competence in Iranian EFL and Non-EFL Learners: Knowledge, skill, awareness, and attitude. *Cogent Education*, 8(1), 1936885. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2021.1936885>
- Valencia, J. Á. A., & Benavides, A. F. (2018). Using social networking sites for language learning to develop intercultural competence in language education programs. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 12(1), 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2018.1503318>
- Yah, H. C., & Heng, L. (2023). Creating a virtual “third space” in a telecollaborative project to promote English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners’ language proficiency and intercultural awareness. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 31(10), 6667-6677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2022.2043384>
- Zadorozhnyy, A., & Lee, J. S. (2023). Informal Digital Learning of English and willingness to communicate in a second language: self-efficacy beliefs as a mediator. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 0(0), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2023.215279>