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Enhancing cross-cultural exchange with AI: ChatGPT's role in an international online student conference

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This manuscript explores the innovative integration of ChatGPT in a cross-cultural online student conference involving university students from Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The AI tool was instrumental in both the preparation and analysis phases, offering language support, cultural insights, and assisting in the development of discussion topics. This study evaluates the impact of AI on student engagement, communication skills, and cultural awareness, highlighting the potential of AI tools in international education settings.

Keywords: intercultural communication, AI-assisted learning, ChatGPT, online student conference, global education

Introduction

In today's increasingly interconnected world, intercultural competence has become an essential skill for students, enabling them to navigate and thrive in diverse global environments. Recognizing the importance of fostering such competence, universities in Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines collaborated on a one-day online student conference centered on global issues and cultural exchange. This event provided a platform for students from different cultural backgrounds to engage in meaningful dialogue, supported by the innovative use of ChatGPT. This AI tool was integrated into the conference preparation and execution, offering language support, cultural insights, and assistance in developing discussion topics.

The aim of this study is to assess the effectiveness of these online student conferences and ChatGPT in enhancing cross-cultural communication and learning among participants. Specifically, the study explores how AI can enrich international educational experiences through AI-assisted interactions. By analyzing the outcomes of the conference, we seek to understand the potential of AI tools like ChatGPT in

facilitating global education, improving students' language proficiency, and fostering greater cultural awareness.

Literature review

The integration of AI in educational settings has garnered significant attention, particularly in enhancing intercultural communication and competence. Deardorff (2006) emphasizes the critical role of intercultural competence as an outcome of international education, highlighting the need for innovative pedagogical tools to foster this competence. AI tools, such as ChatGPT, have shown promise in this regard by providing real-time language support and cultural insights during intercultural exchanges.

Recent studies, such as those by Hackett et al. (2023), have explored the effectiveness of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in higher education, noting significant improvements in students' intercultural competence through structured online interactions. Similarly, Gutiérrez and O'Dowd (2021) discuss the potential of virtual exchange programs to connect language learners across borders, enhancing their communication skills and cultural understanding. These findings align with the outcomes of our study, where ChatGPT's integration facilitated meaningful cross-cultural dialogue among participants.

Moreover, the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC), as explored by MacIntyre et al. (1998), is particularly relevant to our study. WTC is influenced by students' motivation and perceived competence in the target language, both of which were positively impacted by the AI-assisted learning environment. The use of AI not only supported language practice but also helped students navigate cultural nuances, thereby enhancing their overall communication experience.

Method

Participants

The study involved university and high school students from Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines who participated in a one-day online conference. The participants were enrolled at various educational institutions, including Aichi Institute of Technology, Bunkyo University, and Konan University in Japan, Indonesia University of Education, and SMAN 15 Bandung High School in Indonesia, and Mabalacat City College, and Urdaneta City University in the Philippines. The students, aged between 18 and 22, had varying levels of English proficiency and intercultural experience. Their participation in the conference provided an opportunity to engage with peers from different cultural backgrounds, enhancing their intercultural competence and communication skills.

Conference structure

The online conference was structured to facilitate intercultural exchange and discussion on global issues. The event began with an ice-breaking session, allowing



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students to introduce themselves and share aspects of their culture, with prompts and support provided by ChatGPT. This was followed by two 40-minute student-led discussion sessions focused on global challenges. ChatGPT played a key role in the preparation phase, assisting faculty advisors in supporting students with language and cultural insights. The AI tool also helped in developing discussion topics and materials, ensuring that students were well-prepared for their roles in the conference. The event concluded with a debriefing session where students reflected on their experiences.

Data collection

Data collection was conducted through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. During the conference, faculty members observed the students' interactions, focusing on their language use, engagement, and the effectiveness of their communication. A questionnaire was administered at the end of the conference to capture participants' perceptions of their experiences, with a particular emphasis on their language skills, cultural understanding, and the overall impact of the conference. The questionnaire included both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the students' experiences. Additionally, post-conference debriefings were conducted in subsequent classes, where faculty members gathered informal feedback through unstructured interviews. These methods provided rich data that were cross-referenced and analyzed using thematic analysis, with the support of ChatGPT for interpreting open-ended responses.

Results

Quantitative data

The quantitative data collected from the post-conference questionnaire provided insights into the students' experiences and perceptions of the online conference. The participants rated various aspects of the event, including their engagement, cultural exchange experiences, teamwork, willingness to communicate in English, and understanding of global issues (Table 1).

Results indicated high levels of engagement and positive perceptions of the cultural exchange, with mean scores above 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale. Notably, students reported feeling more connected with their peers through teamwork and demonstrated an increased willingness to communicate in English. These findings suggest that the conference successfully facilitated an engaging and culturally enriching experience for the participants.

Table 1. Quantitative data

Item	Mean	SD
Engagement and participation: The online conference format facilitated active participation and engagement.	4.25	0.72
Cultural exchange experience: The cultural exchange session enhanced my understanding and appreciation of different cultures.	4.68	0.58
Team collaboration: Working in teams helped me feel more connected and involved in learning about global issues.	4.35	0.75
Willingness to communicate: I felt comfortable communicating in English with my team and other participants.	4.30	0.80
Understanding global issues: The conference improved my understanding of global issues, especially those related to today's global issues/topics.	4.40	0.75
Autonomy in learning: I felt I had sufficient freedom to explore topics of my interest during the conference.	4.30	0.73
Competence: I feel more competent in discussing global issues after attending this conference.	4.20	0.83
Relatedness to peers: I felt a sense of relatedness and connection with other participants during the conference.	4.50	0.89

Qualitative data

The qualitative data, analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), revealed several key themes that provide deeper insights into the students’ inter-cultural understanding, communication, and overall conference experience. The thematic analysis highlighted six major themes:

Effective communication. Many participants emphasized the importance of language skills in successfully engaging in discussions. One student noted, “I was nervous but I had fun talking to everyone. The content of the discussion was difficult, but I did my best to understand and communicate.”

Engagement and involvement. The sense of inclusion and active participation emerged as significant factors. As one participant shared, “Everyone gave me many thoughts and ideas, so I was motivated to do my best during the sessions.”

Preparation and support. The role of ChatGPT in preparing students was also noted, with mixed responses. Some participants felt well-prepared, while others mentioned challenges in understanding the AI’s guidance. Illustrative comments include, “ChatGPT helped me organize my ideas and make my presentation more interesting.” Comments like, “I didn’t figure out how to do it,” and “I frequently had difficulty understanding what ChatGPT was saying,” indicate areas where additional support was needed.

Increased interest in global issues. Students reported a heightened awareness and engagement with global topics. One participant expressed, “I became interested in global issues because I developed relationships with other participants.”

Improved communication skills. Feedback indicated that many students observed improvements in their language abilities. A participant reflected, “As time went on, I became more fluent and enjoyed it.”

Personal empowerment and enjoyment. The conference also fostered a sense of personal growth and enjoyment. “I realized how much fun it is to communicate in English, so I wanted to study English even harder,” remarked one student.

These themes collectively illustrate the conference’s impact on the students’ intercultural competence and communication skills, highlighting the effectiveness of AI-assisted learning in fostering meaningful cross-cultural exchanges.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the role of AI-assisted tools, particularly ChatGPT, in enhancing intercultural competence and communication strategies among students participating in an international online conference (Gutiérrez & O’Dowd, 2021). The conference involved university students from Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines, providing a platform for cross-cultural exchange and discussion on global issues. The findings from both qualitative and quantitative data indicate that the online student conference and use of ChatGPT likely contributed to students’ intercultural competence across three key dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, and skills.

The participants, who initially faced challenges in communicating in English – a foreign language for all – effectively utilized various communication strategies to overcome these barriers. These strategies included paraphrasing, simplifying explanations, and employing non-verbal cues, which facilitated clearer understanding and more inclusive discussions. This aligns with the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC), where students’ motivation and perceived competence in the target language influence their engagement in communication (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Elahi Shirvan, et al., 2019). The positive outcomes observed in this study are consistent with existing literature, emphasizing the potential of online interactions and AI tools in fostering intercultural competence and global awareness (Hackett et al., 2023).

Moreover, the study highlighted the role of ChatGPT in preparing students for the conference. While some participants reported challenges in fully understanding and utilizing the AI tool, others acknowledged that ChatGPT provided valuable support in language practice and cultural insights, contributing to their overall preparedness and confidence. This finding underscores the importance of integrating AI tools in educational settings to enhance both language skills and intercultural communication.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of AI-assisted learning, specifically through the use of ChatGPT, on the development of intercultural competence and communication strategies among university students participating in an online international



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conference. The findings indicate that ChatGPT effectively supported students in overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, fostering a deeper understanding of global issues and enhancing their intercultural communication skills.

The study also revealed the importance of communication strategies, such as paraphrasing and simplification, in navigating multilingual interactions. Additionally, the role of more proficient English speakers in leading and facilitating discussions was crucial in ensuring inclusive and respectful exchanges.

However, the study faced certain limitations, including a relatively small sample size and the reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce biases. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of AI-assisted learning on intercultural competence.

In conclusion, while the findings underscore the potential of AI tools like ChatGPT in enhancing intercultural education, further research is needed to explore their effectiveness across different educational contexts and to develop best practices for their integration into the curriculum. Despite these limitations, AI-assisted learning remains a promising approach to preparing students for the challenges of intercultural communication in an increasingly globalized world.

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Brent A. Jones is the Director of Language Programs at Konan University, Hirao School of Management, where since 2009 he has helped develop their CLIL program. His research interests include L2 learning engagement, instructional technology, and instructional design. He completed his Educational Doctorate through the Institute of Education at the University of Reading.