Intercultural Practice in a Village School in Sri Lanka: A Dynamic View of Learning Context

Juana DU
Royal Roads University, BC, Canada
Zach GRENZOWSKI
Royal Roads University, BC, Canada

Abstract: This research examines intercultural practices of an English program taught by international volunteers at a village school in rural Sri Lanka. Viewing learning contexts as complex adaptive systems, this research delineates the multi-layer complexity of intercultural contexts and discusses that intercultural learning practices are intertwined with actors and locations. By conducting two-month field work and 27 in-depth interviews, this research offers fresh insights looking into intercultural practices on a community level which involve international volunteer teachers, village students, their parents and village people. From the perspective of nexus of practice, the results highlight that emotional encounters and social interactions on a community level are central to intercultural learning. The results offer implications for intercultural educators and practitioners considering the recent multilingual landscape of rural villages in developing countries. We call for reflexive understandings of intercultural learning and online space which go beyond the traditional notions of the nation-state.

Keywords: Intercultural learning, interviews, practice, rural village, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

> ***"****While the classroom is a part of everyday material worlds based on a curriculum, intercultural learning goes beyond this space and relies on a variety of places, objects and practices… These could be a park bench, a supermarket, a historical building, a coffee shop or a night club – but also a piece of cake, listening to a concert in a church, the visiting of places normally seen in textbooks, a well-loved photograph or a train trip through unknown landscapes" (Najar, 2016, p. 149).*

Intercultural learning practice takes place in everyday material worlds which go beyond language classrooms (van Lier, 1997; Phipps, 2007). It is these moments in time and space, and practices in contexts, that make intercultural learning possible and meaningful. While the language classroom can be a highly authentic place of learning about interculturality, researchers argue that "students learn best when they combine classroom learning with out-of class learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 7). They emphasize that out-of-class learning environments and after-class activities of language learning (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Lamb, 2004; Sundquist, 2009), as the contexts of intercultural learning, shape and are shaped by the practice of intercultural learners (Ben Rafael, 2009; Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Woitsch, 2012; Kramsch, 2009).

Intercultural learning is studied as a socially grounded process of expanding one's knowledge of cultural dynamics and changing assumptions and perceptual skills in a cultural encounter (Nardon, Steers, & Sanchez-Runde, 2011). Intercultural learning allows individuals to adjust his/ her way of communicating and listening in culture-specific contexts

(Mezirow, 1991; Yan Lo-Philip et al., 2015). It invites learners to critically examine one's own assumptions, beliefs and emotions while reflecting on other's assumptions and reactions (Hsiung, 2008). This research studies the intercultural learning practice of an English program taught by international volunteers in a village school in rural Sri Lanka. By studying the multi-layer complexity of context where these intercultural learning practices take place, this research emphasizes the intercultural learning practice and social interactions in the specific cultural context of a rural village in Sri Lanka, which is a cultural context that hasn't been thoroughly studied, compared with other cultural contexts in Asia. Examining intercultural learning practice in this particular context helps develop a comprehensive understanding of intercultural learning emphasizing dynamic social interactions within the local community.

Another reason this study is worthwhile lies in the education system of Sri Lanka. According to the United Nations Human Development Report (2014), Sri Lanka's education system suffers from "uneven quality and access, despite the goal of universal access" (p. 17). Many rural areas, including the village of Mahawilachchiya studied in this research, fall short due to lack of resources, teachers and funding rooted in "other development issues such poverty, marginalization and exclusion" (p. 17). Therefore, it is imperative for the government to ensure that "properly trained and qualified teachers in the core subjects of mathematics, sciences, English and information technology are deployed and retained in the rural and disadvantaged areas" (p. 23). Studying intercultural learning with international volunteer teachers in a village school has practical implications for both policy makers and education practitioners in Sri Lanka as well as in other developing countries.

2. Theoretical Framework

Research on intercultural learning is challenged by the contextuality of the object of the research. While theories on intercultural learning generally acknowledge that the 'context' of the individual learning experience plays an important role for intercultural learning processes, a detailed understanding of what it is we call 'context' is mostly missing (Dervin, 2011; Najar, 2016). Context is still represented merely as a background of the learning activities. The importance of context and social interactions situated in the context haven't been studied thoroughly and require more comprehensive study (van Lier, 1997; Palfreyman, 2006; Phipps, 2007).

2.1 Context: From a Place to a Complex Adaptive System

There have been significant steps towards including context in research about intercultural learning in the last two decades. For instance, Lave (1996) criticizes that context is not always there or fixed regardless of what we do or how things change (Lave, 1996), and discusses the transforming dimension of context. In a similar way, Holliday (1994) highlights two interactive dimensions of context – a wider context involving the influences from outside the classroom and a personal form of context which concentrates on what happens between people in the classroom. Following this line of discussion, learners are regarded as social actors in specific relationships with the language they are learning. Those relationships are determined by the sociopolitical and geopolitical circumstances (Byram & Grundy, 2003). Najar (2016) discusses that the term 'context' mostly is impacted or dependent upon the conditions in which a word, thing or meaning exists and is commonly understood as situated in the setting or environment where learning takes place.

Van Lier (1997) takes an ecological perspective to reframe intercultural learning as strongly influenced by the complex and diverse environments in which learning takes place. Scholars within this ecological approach argue that learning cannot be observed in isolation from the lives and localities intercultural learners live and learn in. The ways that locality is examined is inspired by complexity theory (see Larsen-Freeman, 1997) and exploration of individual learners' interaction with the learning process (Tudor, 2003).

This dynamic view of intercultural learning in context has been developed with an emphasis on contextuality. The contextuality of intercultural learning experiences is demonstrated by the role locations play for intercultural learners while forming complex and interwoven networks, involving human actors, practices and objects (Najar, 2016). It highlights the locality of context and its highly networked, dynamic nature, and encourages research to incorporate the learning context into learning experiences of intercultural learners, as well as the locations.

2.2 A Dynamic View of Intercultural Learning and Space

The connection between intercultural learners' experiences of place and their intercultural practices have been examined. This line of discussion is consistent with the notion that context is not a backdrop of learning but very much connected to localities intercultural learners live and learn in. Maviglia (2015) says that intercultural learning requires a 'space of encounter', a complex and dynamic space that should be carefully built and protected, as intercultural learning is regarded as the creation of a new frame of mind that is ready for the encounter. The space of encounter is an intercultural space characterized by a high level of complexity and tension, and regulated by an interculturalism which creates a habitat of dialogue, debate and mutual understanding. It represents both physical and inner space, and is highly dynamic and always in the making (Maviglia, 2015).

The term of space is further distinguished from the idea of place. For instance, Tuan points out that: "the term space carries in itself an abstract and undifferentiated notion and is commonly defined as 'an abstract term of a complex set of ideas'" (Tuan, 2001, p. 34). Once space starts to feel familiar, it transforms into place. Additionally, when a person feels attracted to a particular space, it transforms into a place as well. Najar (2016) furthers this discussion by emphasizing that intercultural encounters are based on mutual relationship between experience and place, rather than in a static setting. Similarly, Woitsch (2012) addresses space and place as crucial elements of the intercultural language learning process, furthering the discussions of Ingold (2011) that language learners weave their intercultural experience through practices of 'place making' by moving in between boundaries (Ingold, 2011). Following this line of discussion, Melin and Wagner (2015) offer insights into the activities of children at primary schools that are dependent on space as well as the generation of spaces through activities. This supports the argument that there is "an articulation between the way activity is organized and its link with space, inasmuch as space gives its own boundaries to action and action creates the spaces in which it takes place" (Mondada, 2005, p. 14). This furthers the previous discussion that there is a spatial structuration of the participants in the interactions (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004). Najar further argues that the discussion on space needs to be investigated on the grounds of recent spatial-global transformations and a changed environment of the twenty-first century intercultural learners. He points out that intercultural learners need to consider transforming traditional notions of the nation-state into transnational understandings of space and culture (Najar, 2016). This perspective resonates with Scollon's discussions that culture is better conceived as an

imagined community and social action should be focused on as an observable unit of analysis (Scollon, 1996).

2.3 Second Language Learning from the Lens of "Nexus of Practice"

Scholars advocate an intercultural approach to second language learning and highlight the important role of social practices with specific meaning attached in the contexts. This approach has been built upon the discussion of Heath (1983) that "all language learning is cultural learning" (p. 5). Agar (1994) coins the term *languaculture* to demonstrate that language and culture are so tightly interwoven that neither should be studied in isolation from the other. Aligning with this line of discussion, Scollon (2002) develops the concept of "nexus of practice" which links individual learners through a social action in intercultural contexts. He highlights the importance of framing a social action in a particular sociocultural context as an interaction can make a tremendous difference in defining the intercultural practice of 'what is going on'. Scollon (2001) further argues that practices are these recurring social interactions that are usually learned by participating in the everyday social life within a specific community. As an essential component of the MDA (Mediated Discourse Analysis) framework, "nexus of practice" emphasizes the linkage between social action and shared practices of individuals. Following this perspective, new learners of second language acquire language through interactive practices in specific contexts. It is consistent with the statement of Watson-Gegeo that "there is no context-free learning" (Watson-Gegeo, 2004, p. 340). The sociocultural ecology of home, community, school or workplace suggests such are "sites of engagement" where these second language learners practise their situated activities (Scollon, 2001). These interactive routines provide structural opportunities for learners to engage with other actors in the context, such as teachers and other community members. This interactive process is constantly (re)created through the practice of intercultural learning.

2.4 Summary and Research Questions

This literature review provides insight into the study on the complexity of contextuality and intercultural learning practices. Scholars call for further studies examining how a dynamic view of intercultural learning practices impacts our understanding of these locally lived out experiences of intercultural learners of a second language. It is also worthwhile to study how intercultural learning practices take place at a community level from the perspective of nexus of practice. This paper takes these thoughts further and raises the following questions:

1. *How does an international volunteer program overcome barriers and facilitate intercultural learning in a village school?*
2. *How are the intercultural dynamics of learning unfolding in the international volunteer program in this village school?*
3. *How do the intercultural learning practices take place within the local community from the lens of nexus of practice?*

3. Methodology

3.1 The Research Site

The fieldwork was conducted in Mahawilachchiya, Sri Lanka. Mahawilachchiya is a rural village located approximately 40 kilometers from the nearest city Anuranapura in Central Sri Lanka.

According to the regional secretariat (2011), the population of 22,532 is spread out over 638 square kilometers. The village is primarily inhabited by devout Sinhalese (94%) and Buddhists (98%). On the outskirts of the village, the people are more devout and adhere strictly to Buddhist teachings. 39% of the homes do not have electricity. Mahawilachchiya is home to lush jungle and fertile farmland so the people of the village rely primarily on agriculture for their livelihood. Additionally, a few villagers run shops, offer taxi services or work for the government. The village was affected by civil war. In 1998, the Tamil Tigers were around the village and attacked several times, killing or abducting innocent civilians. The most well-known attack is known as the Mahawilachchiya Massacre in which Tamil Tigers shot four farmers who were working in their rice paddy.

The study site of this research is the Horizon Education (used as a pseudonym here), which began in 1998. The founder/principal left his position as an English teacher in the local public school, and began teaching students with new pedagogy in his garden under a mango tree. After some time, he secured funding for a building and later computers and furniture. In 2009, he left the village and things disintegrated under new management. By 2011, Horizon was forced to close its doors due to mismanaged funds and poor staffing decisions. In 2014, the founder returned to the village and was asked by local families to reopen the doors of Horizon. In July 2014, the school reopened again.

Currently, the Horizon Education provides an afterschool program for the local village youth. Students come after school and on weekends to learn English and computer skills. Horizon offers English and computer classes for a fee of 100 Sri Lankan Rupees a month, which is less than one USD.

The programs at the Horizon are located in a small building, housing 10 computers, 25 chairs, a projector and a screen. Nearby is an outdoor sheltered area with a small white board nailed to a tree and some raised and lowered benches serve as a classroom. There is one more sheltered area that serves as a bike shelter. At Horizon, the students are taught to take care of the grounds, the classrooms and the equipment. The day begins around 2:30 pm when the first students arrive, do a quick clean up and plug in the computers. The students have been instructed on proper care and maintenance of the equipment and follow this procedure. On most days, the school principal runs the English lessons, but since the beginning of 2005 foreign volunteers have been teaching.

The volunteer program at Horizon started in late 2004, when a young British woman born to Sri Lankan parents found the school website and reached out to Horizon and offered her assistance. She stayed teaching in the village for three months. At that time the civil war was still happening and Mahawilachchiya was considered an at-risk area. The next volunteers came from the UK after the school principal contacted a UK volunteer organization by email. Later, several staff members from this UK NGO visited Horizon and recommended more volunteers to come. There were also volunteers who learnt about Horizon online and came to the village from other countries. More than 100 individuals have volunteered their time at Horizon.

3.2 Data Collection

The researchers received ethics approval from the university ethical review board before conducting the fieldwork, as youths under the age of 18 participated in this research project. One of the researchers visited the village and stayed with a local family that lived next to the Horizon school. The researcher spent two months in the field collecting data and conducted 27 in-depth interviews during that period of time. To capture an overall picture of the daily operations and practices of the school, the interviewees included students studying at the

Horizon Education, international volunteer teachers, board members and the principal of the school. The researcher also used the participated observation method and engaged in multiple informal conversations with the students, teachers, families and people from the village. This last part of method produced 50 pages of notes resulting from daily observations.

Participants were invited on a voluntary basis and all signed agreements to participate in this research project with researchers. In total, 17 of those students who studied at Horizon were interviewed. The participants consisted of 13 males and 4 females, which represent the student body. The majority were grade 8 and 9 students with 2 boys being grade 11. The consent forms were also gathered from the students' parents or primary caregivers. The length of studying at Horizon ranged from 1 month to 18 months. Some students took breaks from studying at Horizon for a variety of reasons including to attend other institutes in the closest city and for family reasons.

The interviews took place during the after-school program at Horizon in an outdoor class area adjacent to the main building. The researcher asked students questions according to the interview protocol and whenever possible encouraged students to expand and explore their responses through further questioning. The interviews ranged from 30-50 minutes.

First, students were asked to describe their life experiences and cultural impressions on the village and the villagers. They were also asked to describe what being Sinhalese meant to them. Students were then asked what they liked/didn't like about studying at Horizon and their experience at the school and to tell a story about a meaningful experience they had had with a volunteer. They were asked to tell more about their experiences with the volunteers including any criticisms they had. Finally, students were asked what they would like to see at Horizon, how the school could improve or serve students' needs better.

The researcher also conducted four in-depth interviews with the volunteer teachers in a face-to-face setting, to offer a supplemental perspective to examine the intercultural experiences. The volunteer teachers were invited to describe their experiences teaching at the school and living with local families in the village. The four volunteers are from the U.S., Russia, Canada and China. Two of them are male and the other two are female. Their age is from 20 to 28. All have a university degree. They stayed at Horizon from two weeks to two months.

The researcher also conducted four in-depth interviews with the school owner and other board members of the school, to learn their perspectives on the volunteer program, and school operation. In addition, the researcher recorded and transcribed multiple conversations the researcher had with the people living in the community, including the family where the researcher stayed for two months and other people from the village. Interviews were all recorded and later transcribed.

3.3 Data Analysis

We performed data analysis in both inductive and abductive steps (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Combining inductive and abductive approaches has been referred to as 'systematic combining' (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). According to Dubois and Gadde (2002): "In studies relying on abduction, the original framework is successively modified, partly as a result of unanticipated empirical findings, but also of theoretical insights gained during the process" (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 559). While the inductive approach helps researchers to infer a reasonable conclusion given premises which "bear a favorable evidential relation to the conclusion" (Swinburne, 1974, p. 3), abduction leads researchers to refer an appropriate premise such that the conclusion is a valid consequence of the given premise. In other words, abduction is characterized as inference to the best explanation (Harman, 1965). We coded

data and identified the first order themes, and then generated the second order themes by combining/ reducing theme categories. We next followed Ketokivi and Mantere (2010) and Suddaby (2006), and iteratively matched all the identified themes against our theoretical base through a process of abduction. In this step, the empirical data and theoretical framework evolve simultaneously (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Comparison between the emerging themes from the data and theoretical constructs allowed us to introduce additional third order themes.

For instance, we identified "language barrier", "culture barrier" and "institution barrier" by contrasting and analyzing themes associated with learning barrier. We also conducted an additional robustness check to discern between themes of "language barrier", "culture barrier" and "institution barrier" in situations where second order themes appeared to overlap. Here we used contextual information to get further explanations and clarifications, which is important as interviewees in our sample came from a high-context culture (Hall, 1976). In a few cases where we lacked enough information to code properly, the category remained ambiguous, and we dropped these data from the analysis.

4. Findings

Based on the analysis, we first identify the main barriers of intercultural learning practices, in order to delineate the multi-layer complexity of learning practices in the studied sociocultural context; second, we find that emotional encounters function as a mechanism to overcome barriers through social interactions in the intercultural learning setting. In addition, we discuss that community learning practices created an intercultural space for critical learning about ethnicity that sustains teaching and learning practice. This intercultural space extends to online intercultural dialogue that involves students, families and residents of the village to form a community of practice. We summarise our findings below.

4.1 Multi-layer Complicity of Intercultural Learning Practice

A. Learning English as a second language

English as a second language was identified as a main barrier for intercultural learning, as expressed by all the interviewed students. It was also a common theme discussed by the interviewed school administrators. Although those students had started learning English before they came to the Horizon English program, their English learning was happening mostly through reciting and writing English words, a more traditional way to study English in many Asian countries. With very limited exposure to spoken English and few opportunities to practise speaking English at the local public school, the middle school students found it difficult to understand the various accents of volunteers who teach English from different countries. In addition, not all the volunteers were native English speakers, nor was fluent English considered a criterion when screening volunteers as there was no formal recruiting process in place. As a result, international volunteers came from very different cultural backgrounds and spoke English with their own accents. During the time of the field research, there were six volunteers from several countries including Canada, Switzerland, Italy and Kazakhstan. Later during that year, there were two more volunteers from China and the U.S.

One of the interviewed volunteer teachers from Canada describes his experiences:

> *"I had a difficult time to communicate with students at the very beginning. They seemed not to understand my English accent, and I found difficult to understand*

> *their spoken English as well. It took me several days to get used to the way they speak English." (Volunteer teacher 1)*

Due to the Horizon students' very limited exposure to English culture, they also found it challenging to understand English idioms embedded in English-speaking contexts. Although there was a strong expectation for volunteers to develop an English class curriculum, due to lack of resources, this didn't happen. Most of the teaching was conducted without a concrete teaching plan or schedule. Each volunteer usually taught in his/her own way depending on personal background and the length of stay in the village. This inconsistency and lack of structure resulted in challenges to students understanding English. The school principal had expressed the need for a structured English curriculum and had hoped it would happen:

> *"In the long-run, it would be really great if we can have an English curriculum developed with the help of foreign volunteers, so the English classes can be taught in a consistent manner. And it would help the local English teacher as well." (The school principal of Horizon Education)*

B. Resistance to change as learning barriers

Resistance to change has been described as creating barriers for intercultural learning in Horizon programs. The interviewed students confirmed that a high power-distance culture existed between teachers and students in Sri Lanka; this is consistent with previous research on cultural value orientation (Hofstede, 2010). For instance, one of the interviewed volunteers voiced:

> *"Sri Lanka is a hierarchal society. I saw this when I was teaching in the public school and also at Horizon. The teacher was the ultimate authority in the classroom and the stick was still employed as a means of discipline if any student stepped out of line. Nanda (the school principal) explained that Sri Lankan people admire a strong leader who employs a more authoritarian style." (Volunteer teacher 3)*

The teaching styles of most foreign volunteers were quite different from traditional ways of teaching in schools in Sri Lanka. Most volunteers had completed their education in a modern Western context, and were familiar with a learning culture that encouraged questioning teachers and valued students' contribution. Although most volunteers were without professional teaching certificates and experience, their informal teaching approaches allowed them to engage students in a low power distance classroom. Rather than being the teaching authority in the classroom, volunteers played roles as leaders, facilitators or even friends. As one student at Horizon said:

> *"In public school they will give you 10 or 20 words called dictation. And if you don't remember those 10 or 20 words, they will hammer you. (They will hit you with a stick?) Yes, I saw that stick in class the other day, one of the kids was like ahhhh (scared of it). (Student 1)*

The school principal further explained this:

> *"Here we don't believe in, you know, cramming things. Here we would rather put their English in practice, you know we are going to introduce journal writing, like diaries, and online journals like blogs. Learning at Horizon is more fun and*

> *easy to remember because there is no punishment involved other than asking them to remove garages (clean the school ground). That's nothing compared to getting smacked with a stick." (The school principal of Horizon Education)*

Learning English at Horizon was described as "more fun" by most students. In addition, most foreign volunteer teachers adopted an action-based approach to teaching English and provided experiential learning opportunities through activities like films, stories, and sports. For instance, one volunteer teacher, Emilie from Switzerland, was a dancing teacher. She taught students ballet in English, and everyone enjoyed that experience. Students were also quite happy seeing Emilie learn the local dance quickly and perform it in front of students. Another volunteer from Canada taught students the culture of football and played football with students; this was described as the "the most interesting learning experience" by one student.

Interestingly enough, while this active teaching approach was welcomed by most students studying at Horizon, it was described as "a waste of time" by some parents who hesitated to allow their kids to study at Horizon. The school principal shared the parents' view:

> *"They (parents) criticized me for bringing in international volunteers. What they think is that this is a sort of change in the village culture and they are not happy with this. Some parents say that those volunteers are showing students a lot of movies and allowed students to play games, computer games, that is a waste of time." (The school principal of Horizon Education)*

As discussed above, the teaching methods of international volunteers, on the one hand, positively encourage intercultural learning and engagement of students in the school of Horizon; on the other hand, the resistance to change from the parents in the local village creates cultural barriers which impede learning to some extent, as many students were not allowed by their parents to go to the English program. This two-fold dynamic of intercultural learning is embedded in this particular socio-cultural context, and acts as an ongoing process impacted by multiple factors, e.g., learning preferences, family background of students, attitude towards learning, and even cultural background of volunteers (e.g., some cultures are more closely associated with cultural stereotypes than others in the eyes of the village people).

Another factor related to resistance to change is uncertainty embedded in the intercultural learning practices. Because of the lack of structured content and curriculum, foreign volunteers taught classes in their preferred ways. Consequently, it was not only the volunteer teachers, but also some students who talked about uncertainty in their learning experiences at Horizon which further intensify the resistance to learn and change. For instance, one volunteer teacher shared the following example:

> *"Let me give you an example, you never know how many students will show up until you see them in class. Everyday the number of students who come to class varies, and we couldn't really tell in advance". (Volunteer teacher 4)*

This uncertainty undoubtedly challenged the consistency and expectations of teaching and learning. Also, students were not certain about what or how they were going to learn as volunteers taught in very different ways depending on their backgrounds and teaching experiences.

The culture of Sri Lanka scores 45 on uncertainty avoidance according to the cultural value orientation model (Hofstede, 2010), which is moderately low. It means people feel

relatively comfortable with uncertainty and are willing to tolerate uncertainty; this was demonstrated in the teaching practices at Horizon. However, many volunteers came from a high uncertainty avoidance culture, e.g., Russia, and they were more familiar with a structured way of classes with a set of rules and regulations. Those different preferences in the teaching/learning environment created an open space to test new experiences, and this highlighted the nature of intercultural learning as an on-going dynamic process.

C. Institutional barriers of learning

Interviewees identified several learning barriers at the institutional level. "Lack of resources", "lack of funding" and "missing structure" were mentioned by most interviewees multiple times. For instance, the school principal described the situation as follows:

> *"There is a lack of teaching tools and facilities, e.g., functional computers and projectors, etc. Teachers teach on donated blackboards from Korea using old and outdated textbooks. The students arrive at school by foot, or by bicycle if they are lucky, wearing clean white tops and navy blue pants or skirts. At the end of the first session, a student races to the center of the property to smack the old tire rim with a stick, signaling the end of the session." (The school principal of Horizon Education)*

During the time of conducting the interviews, there were only five working computers at Horizon. This was "much better" than the nearest public school. The computer lab had fifteen computers, all in need of repair. Several of them were fixed by a Russian volunteer with a computer science background. Many students were attracted to attending Horizon programs because they could learn with computers there.

The interviewed school principal emphasized the lack of funding faced by many rural schools in Sri Lanka, and Horizon is one of them.

> *"Especially rural schools are underfunded. Urban schools are given resources by the rich parents of their students. For us, the government gives money but it's not enough, so we must collect money from our parents." (Board member of Horizon Education)*

This struggling Horizon school is just one of many. Sadly, many public schools in Sri Lanka are in similar circumstances, using outdated materials and limited resources available to educate. At Horizon, the English and computer classes are offered for a fee of 100 Sri Lankan Rupees a month, which is about less than a dollar. According to the school principal, the fee is not nearly enough to cover costs, rather it is symbolic, so the students know they should appreciate the educational opportunity they receive.

The interviewed school principal also mentioned that:

> *"Due to the lack of public funding, many schools couldn't pay their teachers' salary, which results in the lack of educational opportunities for youth in rural areas. Many youths have to remain in the cycle of poverty that is hard to escape." (The school principal of Horizon Education)*

This also highlights how the international volunteer program at Horizon plays a crucial role in providing learning occasions for village students. As a result, students show their appreciation for this learning opportunity.

4.2 Intercultural Praxis: Overcoming Barriers at Multiple Levels

A. Intercultural practice creates a space for reflective encounters with "differences" in an out-of-classroom teaching/learning environment, including both cognitive and emotional encounters

The international volunteer program offers opportunities for village students to interact with international volunteers on a daily basis. Most of those interactions happen in out-of-classroom settings as volunteers stay with local families while they teach at Horizon. During their time in the village, volunteers spend their time with village students within and outside of classrooms for daily activities, site visits, sports, meals and other routines. Through these social interactions, village students have opportunities to learn about the cultural assumptions, values and lifestyles of volunteers. It opens a new door of intercultural dialogue and exchange for village students through daily experiences and interactions. For instance, one of the interviewed students talks about his reflections on learning about differences as below:

> *"For example, what I learnt a lot from volunteers is that they work on time. If you think something cannot be done, you say I can't do that. If you can, you say I can do that. But in Sri Lanka, it doesn't happen. If you ask someone for help, he will say, Oh, I will come and I will help. But he will easily forget it. If you call several times, he will even ignore your calls. So I want to learn this and hope to see a change in our village. "(Student 6)*

Besides developing intercultural knowledge and awareness at a cognitive level, cultural differences also have been experienced through emotional encounters in many cases. The following student describes her experiences with a volunteer from Switzerland:

> *"When I was studying with Emilie, my friends and me like her dance a lot, and we are so happy to learn from her, although some boys don't like dance. They saw we dance. Eventually some boys got interested in it as well, and they went to Emilie and they learnt dancing from her. Emilie was so happy that she even cuddled them. This type of behavior will not come from the local teachers. It was a little surprise, but people liked that." (Student 8)*

From her description, different ways of expressing feeling and displaying affection in public settings is foreign to these Sri Lanka village students, as it is very different from the low-contact culture of Sri Lanka. Those close interactions build connections between volunteer teachers and students quickly, and develop emotional attachments of students to their foreign teachers. In addition, these daily interactions create an intercultural space to experience and share emotions between volunteer teachers and local students. Those emotional encounters invite students to reflect on their own cultural backgrounds and assumptions, therefore developing cultural empathy and adjusting their cultural behaviours in this interactive intercultural setting.

B. Intercultural practices invite learning overcoming institutional barriers

The intercultural learning practices help to overcome institutional learning barriers in this rural school. Despite the fact that there is a lack of funding and resources (including both human and capital resources), studying at Horizon has become a favored choice supported by many students and their parents in the village. During interviews students ardently described their enthusiasm and appreciation for this learning opportunity and demonstrated a very positive attitude using words such as "rewarding", "the best class", "we learnt a lot", etc.

Many local students were attracted to classes at Horizon as they heard about the foreign volunteers and *"they like to be with them"*, as one student described below:

> *"This is two-folded. On the one hand, it is to learn; On the other hand, it's kind of privilege. You know when you go to a canal, a shop, with the person who comes from another country, it is very good for your image as well. Talking in English, communicating with foreigners, somehow, this is the psyche most of these people in the village have."*

This positive attitude and perceived privilege associated with studying with international volunteers and speaking English drive students to study at Horizon. Some parents support their children's choices; some kids even skip household work, e.g., watering the plants, to go to study at Horizon. International volunteers bring their own cultural experiences, expertise, and are able to leverage resources they bring, which become the collective asset of the learning environment. This helps overcome existing difficulties due to the lack of funding and resources. For instance, the volunteer from Russia who fixed the computers gave students the opportunity to learn computers by practicing rather than by "copying down lines on how to use computers from your teacher and remembering it" (from an interviewed student). Another volunteer used his experience and expertise in applying for international funds to help write a funding application proposal in English for this school. Through the collaborative efforts of volunteers and school administrators, an online fund-raising page has been created, with the hope that it will attract more international attention for financial support.

The intercultural learning practice also serves as the mechanism to bridge the missing gaps in the Horizon program, e.g., the lack of curricula and course structure, not to mention the lack of teaching tools and facilities which is quite common in local schools. Although the inconsistency of teaching content and methods were mentioned in several interviews, all the interviewed volunteer teachers commented something to the effect of "it provides flexible room to teach and develop your own teaching content." A variety of teaching experiences and backgrounds provide a good basis to develop English learning lessons with an interactive and intercultural approach, which is clearly different from more traditional teaching in local schools. During his interview, the principal of Horizon talked about his short-term goal of developing the curriculum based on the volunteers' expertise.

4.3 Encounters with "Differences" Within an Intercultural Space Create Opportunities for Critical Thinking About Ethnicity that Sustain Learning Practice

Although there were a few negative comments on the teaching methods and practices in the village, overall, they were perceived as positive. The principal of Horizon describes as below:

> *"They think that this is a sort of change in the village culture and they are also not happy with it. For instance, there is a hostile attitude towards showing movies in class at Horizon, but I changed that by showing good movies and getting their work done through movies." (The school principal of Horizon Education)*

Interviewed students, volunteers and the administrators of the school all expressed their expectations for change from a more traditional approach of teaching to a more interactive approach. All look forward to using a more interactive and critical approach to achieve better learning results. One student voices his hope below:

> *"It would be really great to see more and more students and teachers get into more activity-based education. I also learnt about critical thinking. It is about how to think about yourself in a way you didn't try before. These volunteer teachers asked us some questions which were never asked by others before." (Student 11)*

Critical thinking has been brought in by international volunteers in their teaching practices by providing space to reflect on one's own ethnicity, asking questions and coming up with independent answers, which have not been emphasized in traditional teaching in local schools. This reflection started naturally with critical thinking about ethnic differences, and carried through into daily encounters of ethnic and cultural differences. As this reflection has been developed and associated with volunteer teaching since the beginning, a more positive and open attitude has been observed in the village. "Teaching is something to be admired" was repeated many times during the interviews. In addition, students and their parents expressed their appreciation for the learning opportunity. For instance, two students say:

> *"My parents say that the volunteers come from a long way to teach. It is a moment not to be missed. The chance to practice speaking English with native speakers is good." (Student 14)*
> *"People here in the village call those volunteers "sutda" which means the white man. Sutdee is the female version of that. I never heard anything negative about volunteers from my parents. They all very much supported me to learn from volunteers." (Student 16)*

This positive attitude and appreciation for a learning opportunity is commonly observed in many normative culture contexts as a way to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms. Sri Lanka is one of those countries and scores 45 on long-term/short-term orientation which is moderately toward short-term orientation. Although people in general are suspicious of change, admiring education creates space for reflective thinking on ethnicity to develop a positive attitude toward the international volunteers' work, which in turn sustains learning practices in this village.

4.4 The Community Practice Creates an Intercultural Space which Involves Students, Families and Residents of the Village, Moving Beyond the Physical Space and Extending Online

During the interviews, students, volunteer teachers and school administrators identified many learning characteristics. "Close distance between teachers and students" is one theme emphasized multiple times, as one student described below:

> *"At Horizon (volunteer) teachers and the students are more close, but at public school they're not so close."(Student 12)*

This close learning distance is created through the interactive efforts from both students and volunteer teachers. One volunteer describes an effort of mutual adaptation below:

> *"Klara (the name of a volunteer teacher) accompanied the kids to the reservoir, the big one. On the way they plucked these wild fruits from around the reservoir. And she also ate them so the kids were so happy. On the way back, you know those kids do not have bathing clothes, but Klara jumped into the water with her clothes on. So the other kids jumped and had fun." (Volunteer teacher 2)*

In this story, the foreign volunteer modified her behaviours to be "more like the behaviour of those kids", e.g., "ate wild fruits" and "jumped into the water with her clothes on", which made her more welcomed and accepted by the local kids. Undoubtedly, those efforts of volunteers to adjust to the local culture shorten the learning distance between volunteer teachers and students. Most of those interactions happened in an out-of-classroom environment, which involved not only students, but also their parents and residents of the village. Those social interactions facilitate mutual adjustments to facilitate the development of an intercultural learning community. As a result, an expected possible change took place in the village community as described below:

> *"I also hope studying with foreign volunteers would bring a change to the village culture. For instance, if the parents and the adults in the village are also taught English, that would be a good point. We can start with the youth and the young adults, and later the village residents." (The school principal of Horizon Education)*

Although it seems only a simple wish from the school principal to promote English learning and speaking in the village, it does demonstrate a potential positive change towards a more open and friendly attitude to speaking English in the village. It reflects an evolvement of cultural attitudes of the village people including students, their families and the local community, and the volunteer program is the main driver of it. This learning culture moved beyond the physical classroom of the Horizon program, and extended into the online space for intercultural dialogue and exchanges.

Some students use very basic smart phones with the app Facebook installed on the phone with the help of volunteer teachers. They have become friends with foreign volunteers on Facebook, and kept connections even after the volunteers left the village and returned to their own countries. A few students have also written emails to foreign volunteers. This practice has been encouraged by the principal of Horizon, as he whole-heartedly expressed below:

> *"Even after the volunteers leave the country, I want to see the students here communicating with the volunteers electronically, e.g., via email or chat on-phone."(The school principal of Horizon Education)*

In addition, through their use of internet, Facebook, YouTube and other online forums, many foreign volunteers have been actively engaged in telling stories about Horizon and the village. Several Facebook pages and groups have been created and organized by the initiatives of volunteers and keen students. These online spaces facilitate the on-going

intercultural dialogues between foreign volunteers, students and people from the village, and form an intercultural community of practice. Later, more international tourists and volunteers were attracted to this village and a new site of CouchSurfing was created and supported by the village.

5. Discussion

This study has provided insights into intercultural learning practices emphasizing the complexity of contextuality from a dynamic perspective of practice. It offers several important theoretical contributions. First, we emphasize the need for context to be reconfigured for intercultural learning outside and beyond the classroom as well as the implied relationality between the diverse elements constituting learning in places. We offer empirical insights looking into the dynamic relationship between intercultural learners and the locations. Intercultural learners play the roles of active parts of a complex adaptive system, which is intertwined with intercultural practices and locations that the intercultural learning takes place in. Second, our results highlight the importance of social interactions during intercultural learning, and contribute to the understandings of the multilingual landscape of rural villages in developing countries. Third, we extend the discussion on Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) to integrate the level of community, and suggest the need to incorporate multilayer complexity of intercultural contexts.

Intercultural learning experiences at the Horizon Education school move beyond classroom settings, as most learning happened during daily interactions between international volunteer teachers and students. These intercultural learning practices have been influenced by the complex and diverse system in which learning takes place; for example, in this case, the program, the school, the village and the international volunteer community, to some extent, all play a crucial role constituting intercultural learning practices. Context is not a backdrop of learning but very much connected to learning experiences of students, and experiences in those places. That is to say, these intercultural encounters beyond the classroom are not placed in a static setting, but are rather based on mutual relationship between experience and places. This dynamic and mutual relationship reconfirms an ecological perspective of framing intercultural learning (Tuan, 2001). Scholars within this approach argue that learning cannot be observed in isolation from the lives and localities intercultural learners live and learn in (Tudor, 2003). This research provides a special scenario to discuss locality by studying the intercultural learning practices that took place in a specific location and the interrelationship between elements that constitute intercultural learning.

This research finds that intercultural dynamics functions as a mechanism to overcome barriers in the learning environments, through both emotional and cognitive encounters. Encounter differences provide opportunities to reflect on intercultural practices in a specific place. In particular, this research discusses the positive role of emotional encounters in intercultural learning in overcoming learning barriers. This finding further develops previous understanding of emotions in intercultural learning. For instance, Tuan (2001) discusses how intercultural experience of place in general is connected to a vast array of emotions that give meaning to an incident (Tuan, 2001). Experiencing place is not only a matter of social practice, it develops along the lines of imagination and experiences of attachment or detachment to places. The results also affirm the notion that emotion is essential in intercultural contact to develop flexibility (Ikeguchi, 2008). In the case of the Horizon Education school, the international volunteer teachers and students co-develop intercultural experiences interdependently through cognitive and emotional encounters. The positive

emotion can serve as a resource in the form of energy to reflect on and overcome learning barriers in an intercultural learning setting.

The study also finds that intercultural learning practices create a space for critical learning about ethnicity that sustains teaching and learning practice. This learning space at the Horizon Education school extends to online intercultural dialogue that involves students, families and residents of the village forming a learning community. The research results also highlight the important role of social interaction through which intercultural volunteers actively cope with multi-layer complexity in communicating with students, parents and the community. Rather than learning English per se, intercultural volunteers have navigated through the linguistic and cultural challenges through social interactions. Those communication actions through language as mediational means have become accumulative social practices within the community context (Scollon, 2005). Particularly, it is interesting to find how the complex cultural elements (e.g., both at individual and community level) interweave into the intercultural contexts where those communication actions take place. This contributed to the current discussions that incorporating institutionalized social relations and community relations could advance our understanding of nexus of practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Future studies should investigate different institutional and community contexts and examine how an integration of institutional perspective could contribute to further understanding of nexus of practice based on the MDA framework.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This research studies the English program taught by international volunteers in a village school in Sri Lanka and provides a specific scenario of intercultural learning practice. In particular, it emphasizes the needs for context to be reconfigured for intercultural learning. It would be meaningful to study and compare intercultural learning practice and the dynamics of intercultural interactions in different institutional and cultural settings in future research.

There are several limitations of the current research. Firstly, we fully acknowledge the possible impact of the presence of the school owner during several interviews with students, due to the lack of resources (e.g., it was impossible to find a cultural translator who spoke both English and local dialect in the area, so the school owner helped to translate several words when the students couldn't understand the interview questions due to their limited English capability). There were no judgmental questions asked during the interviews; however, the presence of the school owner might have had an impact on the interview process, considering the high power-distance culture of Sri Lanka. This requires more careful design and more resources to support data collection.

Second, this research points to the complexities of contextual backgrounds in which learning practice takes place, which needs to be considered carefully in future research. For instance, the historical, social and community environments of Mahawilachchiya have been considered in the current study, which could have a significant impact on the learning practices and dynamics of second language learning in a village school in Sri Lanka. As these factors are intertwined with other elements (e.g., economic development and international relations) in a specific setting, it would be meaningful to further examine the interrelationships of these elements which constitute learning practices in place. Future research could also further examine the crucial role of place as a focus for research on intercultural learning practices.

Last but not least, we mainly emphasized the social and intercultural experiences of village students in a face-to-face environment. Considering the recent global pandemic of COVID-19, it is worthwhile to further examine the social interaction and communication

experiences of the community in an online environment, responding to the possible shift of intercultural communication patterns and experiences on a global basis.

7. Conclusion

This study analyzed intercultural learning practices with an emphasis of English as the second language. By taking into account the dynamics of intercultural learning taking place in a rural village in Sri Lanka, we offer fresh and empirical insights to advance understandings of intercultural learning from the perspective of nexus of practice. Viewing learning contexts as complex adaptive systems, we delineate the multi-layer complexity of contexts and highlight that intercultural learning practices are intertwined with actors and locations that the intercultural learning takes place in. Social interactions and emotional encounters are central in intercultural learning from the perspective of nexus of practice on a community level. The results also contribute to our knowledge of the multilingual landscape of rural villages in developing countries, which goes beyond the traditional notions of the nation-state into intercultural understanding of culture and space in the contemporary world.

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Author Note

Dr. Juana Du is an associate professor in the School of Communication and Culture at Royal Roads University, Victoria, BC, Canada. Her research interests include improving intercultural communication in a globalized world, cross-cultural adaptation of international students, expatriate training and relocation, organizational diversity and culture, and subsidiaries of multinational enterprises and innovation. She has published more than 25 journal articles and served as a journal reviewer for several journals. She is an elected division officer of the International Communication Association (ICA, 2017 to 2020), and Caucus Chair of Academy of Management (AOM, 2020).

Zach Grenzowski graduated from the Master of Arts in Intercultural and International Communication program (MAIIC) in the School of Communication and Culture at Royal Roads University, Victoria, BC, Canada. He works as a researcher and an English teacher at international institutions in several countries, including South Korea, Canada, Sri Lanka and other countries.