Students' Linguocultural Competence: Insights from Internationalization at Home

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Abstract

Globalization has significantly affected the internationalization of higher education, technological advancements, and the development of intercultural competence. In the contemporary landscape, both educators and students find themselves compelled to enhance their linguistic and cultural proficiency through the utilization of digital and online teaching tools. The primary objective of this study was to investigate the progression of students' linguocultural competence and unveil institutional impediments and challenges encountered during the implementation of at-home internationalization. The study involved the participation of thirty students from Kazakhstan and an additional thirty students from Tatarstan, Russia, who engaged in a virtual student mobility program facilitated by Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University and Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University. Zoom was utilized as the platform to facilitate collaboration between the universities. The research adopted a qualitative approach, employing interviews to assess the effectiveness of the internationalization at-home program. Following the program, there was a noteworthy enhancement in the linguocultural competence of third-year students from the Foreign Languages Department. The interviews also brought to light the principal obstacles encountered by universities when implementing domestic internationalization. Through the sharing of their personal experiences, participants highlighted issues such as limited resources, a deficiency in institutional support, and students' discomfort with collaborative work involving foreign peers. The improvement in linguistic and cultural skills was attributed to collaborative lessons and intercultural interactions, affirming the efficacy of the internationalization at-home program, as indicated by positive outcomes.

Keywords: COIL, foreign language teaching, internationalization, internationalization at-home, linguocultural competence.

Introduction

In an epoch characterized by globalization and rapid technological advancement, higher education institutions grapple with an escalating challenge: the imperative to assist students and

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educators in cultivating intercultural competence (Gazioğlu & Güner, 2021). The integration of digital and online teaching tools becomes imperative owing to the burgeoning demands for linguistic and cultural proficiency (Bernardo-Hinesley, 2020; Moyo et al., 2022). This study, concentrating on the challenges and triumphs linked to domestic internationalization initiatives, examines the relationship between global influences, technological progress, and the pursuit of intercultural competency (Tétreault et al., 2021; Vu, 2019).

The contemporary landscape of higher education is profoundly shaped by globalization, impacting both technological progress and the imperative for educators and learners to cultivate linguistic and cultural competency (Hudzik, 2016). The demand for improved language and cultural skills is increasingly crucial, spanning traditional classroom settings as well as online and digital learning environments. Teachers and students find themselves at the forefront of this paradigm shift, compelled to adapt and elevate their skills through innovative online learning environments and teaching methodologies (Evans-Amalu & Claravall, 2021; Johnson & Sdunzik, 2023; Mpu et al., 2022).

As the influential reach of globalization extends globally, higher education in the contemporary era stands at a pivotal juncture marked by unparalleled transformation. This transformation, intricately interwoven with technological advancements, heralds a new era where acquiring linguistic and cultural competency emerges not only as a requisite for success but also as a coveted skill. The conventional boundaries of education are increasingly conspicuous as we navigate the intricacies of this evolving landscape (Altbach et al., 2010). This necessitates a paradigm shift in both pedagogical approaches and the foundational aspects of educational interactions.

In this ever-evolving environment, teachers and students assume the roles of explorers, pioneering new pathways to bridge the gaps between diverse languages and cultures. The conventional classroom, once the sole arena for intellectual exchange, is no longer exclusive; it now coexists with a proliferating array of online and digital platforms, necessitating distinct skills and sensitivities (Woolf, 2010). Teachers, once confined to physical classrooms, now orchestrate virtual learning spaces where students from around the globe converge in a digital realm, erasing geographical boundaries (Isidro & Teichert, 2021; Omodan, 2022; Shatri & Kelmendi, 2023).

 In the context of our ever-more globalized educational environment, a diversified approach to learning, one that extends beyond textbooks and lectures, becomes imperative (Wolhuter & Jacobs, 2021). Language proficiency, once confined to mastery of one's mother tongue, has expanded to encompass a broader array of global languages that facilitate cross-cultural

communication. Moreover, cultural competence is now recognized as the bedrock of education, fostering an environment where students not only comprehend but also respect and value diverse perspectives (Maslova, 2001).

In the evolving landscape of higher education, teachers and students have assumed the role of adaptable, culturally attuned navigators, responding to the considerable impacts of globalization. Beyond technological competence, a nuanced understanding of the diverse languages and cultures comprising our globalized society is now imperative for the future (Jones & Killick, 2013). By embracing these shifts, educators and students are actively shaping the trajectory of a future that is more globally aware and interconnected, simultaneously preparing to meet the challenges of the present.

Against the backdrop of initiatives promoting virtual student mobility, this study focuses on a meticulous examination of how students cultivate linguocultural competency. Thirty students, each from Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University in Kazakhstan and Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University in Tatarstan, Russia, engaged in collaborative virtual endeavors despite their geographical separation. The objective of the study is to illuminate the challenges encountered by institutions in the course of domestic internationalization and to elucidate the intricacies of this process facilitated by the Zoom platform.

Literature Review

Over the past few decades, internationalization and globalization have garnered widespread popularity, becoming deeply ingrained in the considerations of government leaders, stakeholders, and educational researchers. To better equip themselves for integration into a globalized society, a substantial number of students and academics have sought additional opportunities to broaden their perspectives abroad and enhance their employability skills on a global scale. A premier, state-of-the-art higher education system is imperative to foster the development of knowledge societies, offering access to global talent, ideas, and learning opportunities (Hudzik, 2016).

Internationalization is reshaping the landscape of higher education, and concurrently, globalization is exerting a transformative influence on internationalization (Knight, 2008). Frequently, internationalization is misconstrued as synonymous with globalization (Altbach, 2004). Globalization, as per its definition, encompasses "new information and communications technology, the development of an international knowledge network, the prominence of the English language, and other factors beyond the control of academic institutions." Examples of internationalization encompass student mobility, curriculum internationalization, international

cooperation and partnerships, and various policies and programs designed to address the challenges posed by globalization (Altbach et al., 2010).

In tertiary education, internationalization, both as a concept and a strategic agenda, represents a relatively recent and comprehensive phenomenon driven by a dynamic amalgamation of academic, political, economic, and sociocultural motivations. According to De Wit and Altbach, higher education internationalization is on the cusp of transitioning into a new phase. The emphasis is now shifting away from internationalization focused solely overseas, which heavily relies on a small number of highly mobile faculty, students, administrators, and programs. Instead, there is a growing importance placed on domestic internationalization for the collective benefit of the entire academic community. This shift gains significance, particularly in the context of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (De Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Knight (2008) delineates two primary streams of internationalization: "Internationalization at-home" and "Internationalization abroad." The more commonly discussed facet, often referred to as "internationalization abroad," involves mobility and can manifest in various forms. Conversely, another pivotal aspect of internationalization centers on curriculum development and the cultivation of global professional and citizenship skills, commonly known as "internationalization at-home" (De Wit & Altbach, 2020).

In recent years, numerous universities have undertaken substantial efforts to enhance student mobility, notably through initiatives sponsored by the European Union such as the Erasmus Program and the Bologna Process. Despite these endeavors, a significant percentage of students continue to face barriers preventing them from studying abroad. It is imperative that non-mobile students are afforded the opportunity to partake in international education, even if they do not participate in exchange programs overseas, as emphasized by Nilsson (2003).

The concept of "internationalization at-home" has emerged as a more recent idea, aiming to equip students with global competencies without necessitating their participation in study abroad programs. This approach involves deliberately integrating global and intercultural elements into both the formal and informal curriculum for every student in a domestic learning environment, a concept referred to as "internationalization at-home" (IaH) (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69). Internationalization at-home encompasses diverse elements such as curricula, interactions between local and international students and faculty, and the integration of digital technology applications. Its primary objective, as highlighted by the EAIE (2018), is to ensure that all students, not just those who are mobile, can derive benefits from international higher education. At-home internationalization is more curriculum-driven, concentrating on activities

that cultivate intercultural competency, foster global awareness, and utilize technology to facilitate virtual mobility (De Wit et al., 2015, p. 45).

Woolf (2010) presents a solution centered on virtual mobility, highlighting the need to explore alternative options for fostering international academic collaboration. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) emerges as a strategy aiming to facilitate virtual collaboration among Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Given its potential to advance internationalization even within financial constraints, COIL is examined as a substitute for traditional academic mobility and international collaboration in this context (Hildeblando Júnior & Finardi, 2018, p. 20). Rubin (2017) emphasized COIL as a teaching paradigm, emphasizing its role in promoting cross-cultural awareness within a shared multicultural learning environment, moving beyond merely using technology as a platform. Through COIL, students enhance their intercultural learning by employing strategies that foster self-awareness and appreciation for cultural diversity, collaborative problem-solving on globally relevant issues, and the application of communication skills conducive to building rapport with individuals from various parts of the world.

Language plays a pivotal role that is closely intertwined with internationalization policies (Huisman & Van Der Wender, 2004). According to Knight (2006), foreign language education is an integral component of internationalization at-home. Described by Maslova (2001, p. 5), "Linguoculturology studies language as a cultural phenomenon." The notion that language and culture form a cohesive entity is crucial in the process of studying and developing secondary mental constructs that offer students a new conceptualization of the world through language (Kunanbayeva, 2013). The potential for "virtual mobility" through digital learning and language acquisition presents opportunities to enhance interactions with colleagues and classmates from diverse cultural backgrounds, contributing to the cultivation of "global mindsets" (Jones & Killick, 2013).

 The concept of "internationalization at-home" posits that students who study in their home country, without being mobile, should still have access to international education through innovative pedagogical approaches, curriculum development, and interactions with other international students. However, current evidence suggests that implementing this idea is more challenging than anticipated (Harrison, 2015). Non-native English speakers, in particular, encounter significant difficulties when reading course materials and expressing their opinions in English, as revealed by survey data. Typically, students tend to speak less when learning in a language other than their native tongue (Söderlundh, 2010).

Furthermore, there has been limited attention to how foreign students impact non-Western nations, which is becoming increasingly relevant as students increasingly move toward Asia (Lin, 2020). The concept of internationalization at-home has faced criticism in the literature over time. African scholars, in particular, have criticized it for its distinct Western conception (Brewer & Leask, 2012), and Asian universities do not accord it significant emphasis (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

The potential of Kazakh universities appears to be out of sync with the political will to internationalize the country's higher education system. According to Temirtassova (2019), "Kazakhstan's higher education is still in its infancy compared to many countries, as it lacks strategic vision and the level of resourcing needed to make a real difference." In the process of moving beyond their communist pasts, Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet nations have grappled with concurrent demands for political and economic changes since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Higher education has emerged as a central player in the discourse surrounding policy landscapes related to democratization, Europeanization, and market-driven globalization, functioning both as an agent and a product of these transformations. Consequently, internationalization has been perceived as a mode of modernization (Kuzhabekova, 2021).

Promoting the use of English in Kazakhstani higher education represents another strategy aligned with internationalization and globalization efforts. This policy is a response to various factors, including the limited availability of accommodation services and technical support, the relatively low competitiveness of Kazakhstani universities in the global market, and the scarcity of English-taught courses (Rustemova et al., 2020; Uvaleyeva et al., 2019).

Kazakhstan, being a multicultural and post-Soviet country where the Russian language held dominance for an extended period, initiated the cultural project "Trinity of languages" (Nazarbayev, 2007). According to this project, three languages—Kazakh as the state language, Russian as a language of international communication, and English as the language of successful integration into the global economy—were to be developed. In this context, English is taught as a foreign language. The article aims to analyze the effectiveness of an internationalization at-home program and explore the challenges students face in a domestic learning environment.

Most studies in this area focus on examining the effectiveness of internationalization at-home in enhancing the intercultural competence of domestic students (e.g., Chen, 2022; Hackett et al., 2023, Hildeblando Júnior & Finardi, 2018; Pouromid, 2019; Rubin & Guth, 2017; Sercu, 2022). However, fewer studies explore the impact of COIL and internationalization at-home on the development of linguocultural competence among local students (Jiménez & Hernández,

2021). Pouromid (2019) notes that the use of COIL is an underexplored area in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT).

The objective of this study is twofold: firstly, to evaluate the impact of internationalization-at-home programs on enhancing students' linguocultural competency, and secondly, to explore the educational experiences of Russian and Kazakhstani students participating in language programs abroad.

The study's objectives are as follows:

1. To delineate the concepts of "internationalization at-home" and "linguocultural competence."
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of internationalization at-home in fostering the development of students' linguocultural competence.
3. To identify obstacles and challenges faced by universities in the implementation of internationalization at-home.
4. To provide recommendations aimed at enhancing the implementation of internationalization at-home in higher education institutions.

Method

Research Design

To explore and understand participants' perspectives on students' linguocultural competencies within the framework of domestic internationalization, this study employs a qualitative research design. The research utilizes semi-structured, open-ended questions as a guiding framework, enabling participants to articulate their opinions and share experiences in their own words (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Sample

The study encompassed a total of 60 participants, with 30 students each from Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University in Kazakhstan and Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University in Tatarstan, Russia. The participants were enrolled in courses titled "English for Specific Purposes C1" at Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University and "Practice of Oral and Written English" at Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University. All participants belonged to the Foreign Languages Departments and were third-year students. The primary language for Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University students is Kazakh, while Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University students speak Tatar and Russian. English serves as the first foreign language for

both groups, and Korean is the second language for students at Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University and Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University. The majority of participants fell within the age range of 19 to 21, and, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001), their proficiency in the foreign language was approximately at the B1/B2 level.

A comprehensive assessment procedure was employed to determine the participants' foreign language proficiency levels, falling within the B1/B2 range of the CEFR. This assessment involved the examination of academic records, standardized language proficiency tests, and self-reported language histories. Participants were requested to provide insights into their language learning experiences, including any additional language exposure and formal coursework. The determination of their proficiency levels within the designated range was further informed by their performance on accredited language proficiency tests that adhered to the CEFR standards.

The CEFR serves as a widely adopted framework in Europe for assessing and categorizing language proficiency. It facilitates international comparisons of language competency levels and provides a standardized framework for recognizing language credentials. In this study, the CEFR is utilized to assess participant language proficiency, classifying results within a standardized framework. The designations B1 and B2 within the CEFR represent specific levels of language proficiency.

The B1 level, classified as Intermediate, signifies individuals who possess the ability to understand the fundamental ideas presented in straightforward, standard input across various contexts such as work, the classroom, and leisure activities. They are adept at managing the majority of situations encountered while traveling in regions where the language is spoken. At this level, individuals can produce simple yet coherent texts on topics within their knowledge or interest, summarizing experiences, expressing hopes, dreams, and aspirations, and providing concise arguments regarding their beliefs and goals.

The B2 level, categorized as Upper Intermediate, denotes individuals who possess the ability to grasp the fundamental concepts presented in challenging texts, covering both concrete and abstract subjects, including professional discussions in their field of expertise. They can engage in regular and stress-free conversations with native speakers, communicating fluently and spontaneously. At this level, individuals can express opinions on contentious issues and delineate the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions in well-written and comprehensive texts across a variety of subjects.

Participants in this study are anticipated to possess a robust foundation in the language, showcasing foreign language competence at approximately the B1/B2 level in the CEFR. This proficiency level enables them to engage in a variety of communicative activities and comprehend both straightforward and complex texts. The utilization of CEFR levels serves as a consistent and globally accepted method for evaluating and comparing participants' language competency in this study.

Instrument and Data Collection

The data for this study were predominantly collected using semi-structured, open-ended questions. This approach facilitated participants in articulating their perspectives on students' linguocultural competencies through internationalization at-home.

- The fundamental research questions guiding this investigation are as follows:
- 1. What are the key concepts associated with "internationalization at-home" and "linguocultural competence" in higher education?
- 2. How effective is the implementation of internationalization at-home in developing students' linguocultural competence?
- 3. What are the main obstacles and challenges that universities face when implementing internationalization at-home initiatives?

4. What recommendations can be made to improve the implementation of internationalization at-home at higher education institutions?

In order to secure informed consent, all potential participants were provided with information regarding the study's purpose and sought their agreement to participate. Throughout the interviews, field notes were diligently taken, and the audio recordings were transcribed for subsequent analysis using the NVivo 12 software package. These field notes encompassed detailed descriptions of the dialogue, events, physical settings, and demographic information of the participants. Creswell and Creswell (2017) underscore the significance of field notes in qualitative research, emphasizing their role in capturing contextual information and providing detailed descriptions of the research setting. The utilization of NVivo 12 software aligns with contemporary qualitative data analysis practices, facilitating systematic coding and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts.

To facilitate collaboration between the two universities, two professors from each institution collaborated through the Zoom platform. Prior to the commencement of classes, these lecturers diligently prepared the course, conducting multiple Zoom conferences to discuss subjects, lesson plans, and structure. Over a span of two weeks and eight class periods, students and teachers worked in pairs to form groups comprising fifteen students each. The lessons were

crafted to include exercises aimed at enhancing students' proficiency in both language and culture. Diverse topics were covered, such as "My Country," "Traditions and Cultures," "Customs and Superstitions," "Youth Interests," and "Famous Personalities." Students were assigned specific topics for study and encouraged to engage in discussions about elders and their own cultures. This approach allowed all students to provide comments on each other's work. Moreover, the students established a group on the VK platform, a Russian social media platform akin to Facebook, recognized for its emphasis on local users and versatile multimedia sharing capabilities. In this group, students shared collaborative projects and photos from their lessons. These posts are consolidated under the hashtag #KazakhstanRussiaCollaboration.

Data analysis

The analysis process entailed coding and comparing preliminary codes, and final themes were established to ensure triangulation, aligning with the focus on students' linguocultural competence through internationalization at-home. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and variations in participant responses. This iterative process involves systematically coding and categorizing the data to derive valuable insights. To ensure a thorough engagement with the qualitative data, the analysis was performed manually.

The findings were subjected to critical analysis, with a focus on their implications for foreign language teaching practices and the development of students' linguocultural competence. Through the data analysis process, there was a comprehensive exploration of students' linguocultural competence in foreign language teaching, extracting valuable insights from the context of internationalization at-home. These findings served as a foundation for subsequent discussions, recommendations, and implications aimed at enhancing foreign language teaching approaches and fostering students' linguistic and cultural competencies.

Every recorded interview was transcribed verbatim by the researchers, who were meticulous in capturing subtleties such as emphasis and tone in the written word. After becoming acquainted with the data by a thorough reading of the transcriptions, the researchers made notes regarding their initial observations, noteworthy quotations, and recurrent themes. Open coding was employed to annotate the text, assigning codes to passages that exemplify important ideas or concepts, and subsequently organizing related codes into more general categories. Before finalizing the codes to ensure consistency, the researchers identified the main themes and sub-themes within each category. Colleagues provided feedback on the coding scheme and interpretations, enhancing the analysis's validity and dependability. This collaborative input contributed to the refinement of the coding process and the overall reliability of the analysis.

Results

A pivotal moment in the academic history of Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University unfolded with the introduction of internationalization on campus. The decision to register on the COIL platform signifies a deliberate and forward-thinking step toward integrating global perspectives into the university's curriculum.   This pioneering choice not only positions the university at the forefront of innovative teaching strategies but also introduces a novel method of instruction for both teachers and students.

The results of the interviews conducted with the participants illuminated various facets related to students' linguocultural competencies through internationalization at-home. A comprehensive total of 60 students were interviewed, and their perspectives offered valuable insights into the research questions posed by the study. The participants shared their comprehension and perspectives on the key concepts associated with "internationalization at-home" and "linguocultural competence" in higher education. Students from both Kazakhstan and Russia emphasized the importance of these concepts within their academic experiences and demonstrated a nuanced understanding of their implications.

> *In my understanding, "internationalization at-home" aims to create a culturally diverse and inclusive atmosphere where students can develop a broader understanding of different cultures, languages, and perspectives without necessarily traveling abroad. In my academic experience, this concept has been highly valuable as it exposes me to various international perspectives, enhances my cultural awareness, and fosters linguocultural competencies (RUS_1).*

Through the interviews, the main obstacles and challenges faced by universities in implementing internationalization at-home initiatives were unveiled. Participants openly shared their firsthand observations and experiences, identifying issues such as limited resources, a lack of institutional support, and challenges in establishing meaningful intercultural interactions.
 A major barrier identified was the issue of limited resources. Participants expressed concerns about the availability of sufficient financial and educational resources required for the effective implementation of internationalization at-home programs.   These concerns encompassed challenges such as gaining access to a diverse array of educational materials, securing funding for cultural events, and establishing the technical infrastructure needed to facilitate global collaboration. The narratives of the participants consistently highlighted a perceived lack of

institutional support. While recognizing the benefits of internationalization, participants lamented the absence of extensive support networks from their respective institutions.

The lack of support manifested itself in various ways, including insufficient supervision for students engaging in cross-cultural activities, inadequate training for faculty, and a general absence of a strategic institutional framework to support internationalization. The interviews provided insights into the complex difficulties involved in promoting fruitful cross-cultural exchanges. Participants emphasized the challenges of fostering genuine cross-cultural interactions, citing issues such as language barriers, divergent cultural norms, and a lack of official initiatives that facilitate continuous cross-cultural communication. These findings underscore the importance of addressing the sociocultural and practical facets of internationalization at-home programs for their success within educational organizations.

> *In striving to implement internationalization at-home initiatives, universities face numerous significant obstacles and challenges. One notable concern is the limited accessibility of resources. Sufficient funding and support are necessary to organize cultural events, language courses, and international collaborations, among other activities, to create an environment that is both culturally diverse and inclusive (KAZ_2).*

The interviews aimed to assess how effectively at-home internationalization contributes to students' linguocultural competency development. Participants reported positive results, indicating that their language and cultural skills improved through group instruction and cross-cultural exchanges. Throughout the preparation process, students mentioned learning valuable information about the traditions and customs of other countries and developing a deeper appreciation for their own culture.

The participants' feedback unveiled an impressive insight: there was a noticeable and positive impact on their language proficiency. Collaborative lessons, characterized by cross-cultural communication and shared learning experiences, were highlighted as crucial for improving language proficiency. Participants reported feeling more adept at communicating in the target language and having a deeper awareness of the cultural nuances inherent in language use.

The interviews unveiled that intercultural interactions have a substantial impact on participants' cultural competencies beyond language development. Those involved expressed that they gained significant knowledge about the practices and conventions of foreign nations, fostering a deeper understanding of the cultural fabric intertwined with various linguistic environments.

This exposure broadened their perspective, providing a special space for cross-cultural dialogue that dispelled preconceptions and promoted respect among participants.

> *Initially, there were doubts about the possibility of acquiring knowledge about another country's culture online. However, as it turned out, it was entirely possible. We exchanged our opinions and gained a wealth of valuable information from our friends from another university (RUS_2).During the course, I gained a deeper understanding of the significance of our traditions, even though I had prior knowledge of them, and I learned more about Tatarstan's culture. I also found similarities between the cultures of the two nations. I had the chance to learn about a new culture (KAZ_1).*
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> *At first, I had a fear of being misunderstood and was embarrassed to express my thoughts in English. However, as we began to interact more closely outside the classroom via the VK platform, and in the classroom where we could share our opinions and discuss different topics, the course helped me become more confident in interacting with people from other cultures (KAZ_3).*
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> *During these two weeks, I had a precious opportunity to practice English with foreign students. They encouraged me to speak more in class, and it helped me enhance my English-speaking ability (RUS_3).*

Recommendations for Improvement: The interviews served as a platform for participants to provide valuable suggestions for enhancing the implementation of internationalization at-home in higher education institutions. Their recommendations covered various areas, including curriculum development, faculty training, the creation of inclusive learning environments, and fostering cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.

The insights obtained from the interviews underscore the transformative potential of collaborative internationalization at-home initiatives. The findings emphasize the importance of addressing challenges, implementing effective strategies, and establishing supportive environments to enhance students' linguocultural competence. These results make a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the field and offer practical recommendations for institutions aiming to optimize their internationalization efforts. The qualitative findings facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, providing a deeper exploration of the participants' perceptions and recommendations.

Discussion

Our findings are similar to recent studies by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture as well as the Case of Malmö, indicating that internationalization at-home is still an unfamiliar concept for students and academics at higher education institutions (Nilsson, 2003; Weimer, et al., 2019,). The project also seeks to enhance students' linguocultural competence through online collaboration. Russian scholar V. Vorobyov introduced the terms "linguoculturology" and "linguocultural competence," advocating the study of specific cultural values directly linked to language. He defines "linguocultural competence" as "a system of knowledge about culture, embodied in a certain national language" (Vorobyov, 2006).

Linguocultural competence, as per Garaeva (2014), forms the foundation of cognitive communication. It involves the ability and willingness to interact and comprehend members of other linguocultural societies appropriately, grounded in the acquisition of knowledge about the world expressed through language. The current focus of teaching foreign languages is on developing communicative competence, with linguisticological competence being a fundamental component. Risager (2006) introduces the concept of languaculture, emphasizing its importance in understanding the intricate interplay between language and culture in today's interconnected world.

 Engaging with individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds offers the opportunity to immerse oneself in a "'new language-culture'' (Fantini, 2020). Usó-Juan and Flor (2006) highlight that intercultural competence requires proficiency in a foreign language along with an understanding of the target culture. Acquiring such competence is crucial for students to fully leverage the benefits of internationalization at home. Therefore, foreign language pedagogy plays a vital role in providing students at these institutions with the intercultural competence necessary for fluent communication in the target language (Pouromid, 2019).

 Internationalization at-home has emerged as a crucial focus in higher education, recognized for its significance in fostering intercultural experiences (Kor et al., 2022; Slotte & Stadiusi, 2019; Weimer et al., 2019). Hodges et al. (2020) emphasize that the methodological shift prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic is akin to adopting an emergency remote teaching methodology, aiming to alleviate the challenges posed by the historical circumstances we have all faced, rather than constituting a true digital transformation of teaching and learning.

The current challenges and unforeseen circumstances, as highlighted by García-Peñalvo and Corell (2020), have exposed methodological and competency shortcomings in education. This shift toward digitalization, compelled by the ongoing changes, has necessitated the replacement

of outdated models with new ones and the adoption of innovative techniques. Despite being an existing concept, internationalization at-home has gained strategic importance, especially given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy. The evidence supports the value of internationalization at-home in fostering key competencies among foreign language students and offering non-mobile local students meaningful international learning experiences.

Similar to our study's qualitative analysis, other research, such as that by Psychouli et al. (2020), has found that internationalization at-home programs are effective in enhancing linguocultural competence. The study, conducted after an international online conference on collaboration, suggested that students' cultural awareness increased, and they expressed a strong desire for more frequent and culturally diverse experiences.

The interconnectedness of language and culture is widely acknowledged (Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000; Kramsch, 1991; 1993), although the mere act of learning a language may not automatically lead to an enhanced understanding of the target culture(s) (Byram et al., 1991; Dlaska, 2000). Culture is viewed not as a passive entity awaiting discovery but as an active meaning-making system constructed within every communicative act (Barro et al., 1998). Recognizing this, our study implemented a linguocultural exchange program that emphasized linguistic and cultural practices. Through digital tools, students from two universities, each with distinct cultural backgrounds, engaged in discussions on assigned topics both inside and outside the classroom. These activities served as a bridge, providing students with a secure cultural space to explore and reflect on their own and others' cultural norms and values.

We share the view that "linguistic and cultural phenomena can be brought together and attached to more abstract principles of both base (C1) and target (C2) language and culture, where conscious parallels can be drawn, and where language can be explicitly linked to its meaning in a particular sociocultural and historical context." This approach, advocated by Kramsch (1991, p. 229), is considered optimal for developing cultural competence. Redefining curricula, classrooms, and campuses as shared spaces with the potential to promote intercultural learning requires conscious and deliberate efforts (Agnew & Kahn, 2014).

The comprehensive research involving 213,160 undergraduate students from nine universities is a significant contribution to understanding the impact of internationalization at-home. The findings, indicating that students engaged in internationalization at-home activities demonstrated higher levels of global and intercultural competencies compared to those who studied abroad, challenge traditional assumptions. This suggests that internationalization at-home can be equally, if not more, effective than formal study abroad experiences, highlighting

the importance of fostering global perspectives within the domestic academic environment (Soria & Troisi, 2014).

Jin's (2020) observation regarding the shift in focus from language learning to developing language education and intercultural/communication skills aligns with the evolving landscape of global cooperation. The role of digital resources and the prominence of English in facilitating international engagement have become increasingly crucial. Guimarães and Hildeblando Júnior (2021) highlight the potential of digital resources in promoting language use, especially for individuals facing barriers to physical mobility, often rooted in financial constraints. The Council of Europe (2020) underscores the essential nature of language and communication skills for meaningful societal engagement. The integration of digital tools in experiences like Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) contributes significantly to achieving these goals, fostering cross-cultural communication and education.

Green et al. (2012) highlight motivations for using English in higher education, including enhanced employment and mobility prospects, aligning with the demand for graduates proficient in English for international exchanges. However, challenges related to English usage in global higher education institutions, such as a shortage of proficient lecturers, have been acknowledged (Macaro et al., 2018; Moore & Finardi, 2019). Considering the limited English proficiency among the Kazakh population, as reflected in the English Proficiency Index (EF, 2020), the COIL platform provides a valuable avenue. Through COIL, bilaterally designed syllabi on the internationalization of the higher education system in Kazakhstan were developed, focusing on the formation of linguistic and cultural competencies for 3rd-year students in the "Foreign Language: two foreign languages" specialty. This approach, emphasizing intercultural interaction within foreign language education, aligns with Pouromid's (2019) assertion about the significant role of language education in realizing internationalization objectives.

In terms of learning outcomes, our study findings revealed that students acquired new knowledge and enhanced their linguocultural awareness. The qualitative findings facilitated a comprehensive understanding of participant perceptions, underscoring the significance of intercultural interactions and cultural awareness in the development of linguocultural competence. Consistent with researcher Smith's (2020) observations, interactions with diverse cultures and languages were identified as crucial contributors to fostering students' linguocultural competence. However, preparing future English teachers at universities with the aim of producing linguoculturally competent students will not be without challenges. The studies analyzed here identified challenges and obstacles, including teachers and students'

adaptation to an online format, language barriers, time zone issues, lack of resources, and absence of support and training, among others. These obstacles align with findings from previous studies (Brown, 2017; Williams, 2019; Li & Xue, 2021; Slotte & Stadiusi, 2019; Weimer et al., 2019; Nghia et al., 2019). Addressing these challenges is crucial for the successful implementation of internationalization at-home programs. As emphasized by researcher Garcia (2021), institutional commitment and support are key factors in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of internationalization at-home initiatives. Creating a culturally diverse and inclusive environment requires adequate funding and support for organizing various activities, such as cultural events, language courses, and international collaborations.

It's worth noting that, at the start of the project, students did not feel comfortable interacting with their foreign counterparts. This presented an additional challenge for our teachers. As highlighted by Harrison (2015), one concern is that foreign students might hinder the performance of workgroups, stemming from communication difficulties related to languages and apprehensions about potential disagreements linked to cultural differences. Students also expressed concerns that miscommunication might lead to embarrassment or unintentional offense.

In addressing the challenges mentioned earlier, the authors recommend incorporating intercultural perspectives into the formal curriculum to better prepare students for intercultural contact. Additionally, they propose the implementation of mandatory courses on intercultural communication for students across all academic disciplines (Weimer et al., 2019).

The authors propose several recommendations to address the challenges associated with internationalization at-home programs. They suggest providing training sessions for administrative staff, academic personnel, and students to facilitate the understanding and implementation of these programs. Creating inclusive learning environments and fostering cross-cultural dialogue and understanding are highlighted as key objectives. Moreover, the authors recommend integrating intercultural communication and language studies into core curricula, including internationalization at-home indicators in performance target agreements, and recognizing lecturers who employ innovative strategies for internationalization at-home (Weimer et al., 2019).

The observed positive impact on the development of students' linguistic and cultural competencies in this study is consistent with findings from previous research by Johnson et al. (2018), Jiménez & Hernández (2021), and Guimarães et al. (2019). These studies also reported positive outcomes associated with internationalization at-home activities.

The results of this study further support the idea that collaborative online lessons can serve as an effective alternative for promoting intercultural learning. This aligns with the perspective of Lee (2019), who emphasizes the potential of online platforms in facilitating cross-cultural exchanges.

The study's conclusions hold several practical and theoretical implications. Firstly, the positive impact of collaborative online lessons on linguocultural competencies emphasizes the potential of internationalization at-home initiatives as a successful pedagogical approach. Organizations may consider incorporating such programs into their curricula to enhance the language and cultural proficiency of their students. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of institutional support, resources, and faculty training for the successful implementation of internationalization at-home, as highlighted by the identified obstacles and challenges. The participants' suggestions provide valuable guidance for organizations seeking to improve their practices in this area.

Implication of the Study to Research Context and Language Teaching in Kazakhstan

The study's implications for research contexts and language teaching in Kazakhstan are noteworthy. The positive results noted in this study align with earlier findings by Johnson et al. (2018), Jiménez & Hernández (2021), and Guimarães et al. (2019). The consistent pattern of positive effects associated with internationalization at-home activities is demonstrated by the studies' coherence. This research lends support to the notion that internationalization at-home activities contribute to the development of students' linguistic and cultural competencies. The significance of integrating these activities into language education programs is underscored by this implication, providing valuable insights for scholars and educators in Kazakhstan.

The study underscores the effectiveness of collaborative online courses in fostering cross-cultural learning, aligning with Lee's (2019) research highlighting the potential of online platforms for promoting cross-cultural interactions. This implication suggests that enhancing intercultural competency among students in Kazakhstan can be achieved through the integration of online components into language teaching methodologies. Language instructors in Kazakhstan can use the study's findings to enhance their instructional methods, leveraging the benefits of internationalization at-home and group online classes for more effective language instruction that develops linguistic and cultural competency. The research supports the encouragement of cross-cultural interactions, both online and in traditional classroom settings, indicating that educators and institutions in Kazakhstan can explore and implement various strategies to expose students to diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

The study's results offer practical applications for researchers, policymakers, and language educators in Kazakhstan, guiding the development of language policies and programs. The positive outcomes provide evidence supporting the integration of internationalization into language education curricula through at-home activities and collaborative online lessons. The study's conclusions emphasize the importance of global competency, extending beyond mere language proficiency. By incorporating activities that promote cross-cultural understanding, language education can contribute to shaping individuals who are well-rounded and capable of navigating a world that is increasingly diverse and interconnected. In summary, the study's implications for research contexts and language instruction in Kazakhstan underscore the advantages of internationalization for students' linguistic and cultural competencies through at-home activities and collaborative online lessons, offering valuable insights for educators, researchers, and policymakers seeking to enhance language instruction strategies and prepare students for effective communication in a globalized context.

Limitations

The study focused specifically on third-year students from two universities: Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University in Tatarstan (Russia) and Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University in Kazakhstan. While this targeted approach facilitated an in-depth analysis within a specific context, it also brings attention to the homogeneity of the sample. As a result, the findings may not be entirely generalizable to a broader population.

The study employed the subjects "English for Specific Purposes C1" and "Practice of Oral and Written English" to recruit participants. It is important to note that the findings may have limited applicability to students in different academic fields or language programs. The program-specific context, defined by these particular courses, could lead to variations in the impact of internationalization at-home across diverse program structures.

The study focused on participants with a foreign language proficiency level around B1/B2 according to the CEFR. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the nuanced effects of internationalization at-home on individuals with varying language proficiency levels and linguistic backgrounds.

While the study focused on participants with a foreign language proficiency level of approximately B1/B2 according to the CEFR, the results may not fully capture the nuanced impact of internationalization on individuals with varying language proficiency levels. Additionally, the study primarily included participants whose mother tongues were Tatar and Russian or Kazakh. The limited linguistic diversity in the study sample may limit the

generalizability of the results to a wider range of linguistic backgrounds, potentially overlooking differences in the effects of domestic internationalization on linguocultural competencies. Furthermore, the participants, primarily in the 19–21 age range, represent a specific age group in an academic setting, raising questions about the wider applicability of the results to student populations of different ages.

The study focused on universities in Kazakhstan and Tatarstan, and the distinct cultural and regional characteristics of these environments could influence the generalizability of the results to other cultural contexts. Variations in teaching methods and geographical considerations may limit the broader applicability of the study's findings.

Conclusion

This study explored the concept of linguocultural competence through internationalization at-home and assessed its implementation and effectiveness in higher education. The findings offer insights into the core concepts related to internationalization at-home and underscore the challenges universities encounter during the implementation of such initiatives. The qualitative analysis revealed that students experienced improvements in their linguocultural competencies through participation in group online lessons.

Based on the research findings, several recommendations can be proposed to enhance the implementation of internationalization at-home. Universities should allocate sufficient funding to support language and cultural learning experiences, provide faculty training in intercultural pedagogy, and establish collaborations with foreign universities. Additionally, creating opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural interactions, both online and offline, can contribute to the development of students' linguocultural competence.

Certainly, further research could explore additional elements contributing to the development of linguocultural competence through internationalization at-home. Investigating the role of technology, intercultural communication abilities, and the long-term outcomes of these initiatives could provide valuable insights. Comparative studies across diverse educational environments and student demographics would enhance our understanding of the effectiveness and transferability of internationalization initiatives at-home. This approach holds the potential to inform best practices and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of promoting linguocultural competence in higher education.

The qualitative findings, overall, provide valuable implications and insights for future research, contributing to the existing body of literature on linguocultural competence and internationalization at-home. In conclusion, through the presentation of empirical data

showcasing the positive impacts of collaborative online lessons on students' linguistic and cultural skills, this study contributes to the existing body of literature on linguocultural competence and internationalization at-home. The results underscore the significance of institutional support and cross-cultural interactions in the development of linguocultural competence. Higher education institutions can enhance their internationalization at-home programs and promote students' linguistic and cultural development in a globalized world by implementing the study's recommendations.

Acknowledgment

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