Task-Based Language Learning and Its Impact on Cultural Communication Competence among ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT:

In English as a Second Language (ESL) settings, task-based language learning (TBLL) has been brought to the forefront of research for its ability to facilitate intercultural interaction and authentic communication. Intercultural tasks with an online component give learners opportunities to interact meaningfully with people of other cultures in English. This study examined learners' motivation, perceptions, engagement experiences, and expectations during task-based intercultural communication activities. A mixed-methods design was employed using data from 26 English-major students who participated in six online intercultural communication sessions. Quantitative motivation scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Shapiro–Wilk tests, the Friedman test, and Kendall's coefficient of concordance, while qualitative reflections were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that motivation remained consistently high across all six measurement occasions, with no statistically significant differences over time. Qualitative results showed that learners valued the activities for cultural exchange, English language practice, intercultural learning, and authentic communication opportunities. Communication challenges, particularly delayed or missing responses, generated temporary motivational fluctuations but did not diminish overall engagement. Learners also expressed a strong desire for increased opportunities to interact with foreign interlocutors and participate in authentic communication tasks. The results indicate that the task-based intercultural communication

activities can help learners to sustain their motivation and experience meaningful intercultural activities, which could lead to cultural awareness and readiness for future intercultural communication in English.

Keywords: task-based language learning, intercultural communication, ESL learners, learner motivation, cultural communication competence.

1. Introduction

Task-based language learning is an important teaching method in English language teaching since it focuses on communication and language usage for genuine purposes. With the expansion of globalization, the interactions among individuals from different cultural backgrounds are growing, and language education is expected to help not only language development but also effective communication across cultures. As such, intercultural communication competence has become an important goal in the study of English, especially for students who will likely find themselves in intercultural settings in the academic, professional, and social worlds. As a language teaching approach, the intercultural perspective aims to foster learners' awareness of cultural diversity, understanding of cultural differences and ability to interact appropriately in intercultural communication instead of just language accuracy (Corbett, 2022). Intercultural communicative competence is also considered to be a crucial part of successful communication in the ever-globalized world, as is reflected in the contemporary discourse of English language education (Xu et al., 2025).

The idea of task-based language learning is useful for fulfilling these goals as it puts language use into real activities that involve learners in exchange, negotiation and communicative problem solving. Whereas the traditional methods emphasize grammatical structures and their explicit teaching in the classroom, in task-based instruction, communicative performance is at the heart of the process of learning. Learners are encouraged to use language as a means of interaction through involvement in meaningful activities and to become confident and flexible in their use of language. The theoretical bases of task-based language teaching emphasize the significance of meaning for language development and communicating in the learners' language (Sholeh et al., 2020). Pedagogical approaches that see tasks as means to foster real-world and classroom interactions and meaningful use of the language have also bolstered these principles (East, 2021).

The use of task-based approaches has been well documented in the development of communicative competence and has been a feature of the development of this approach. Research has demonstrated that students who engage in task-based activities are given opportunities to practice language in contexts that are similar to real communication situations, which improves their skills in expressing ideas, negotiating meaning, and interacting. Task-based instruction has been recognized as effective in developing communicative competence since it makes the learners use the language to accomplish the task rather than just expressing the knowledge of the language form (Nurmayanti, 2025). Task-based activities have also been found effective in the teaching and learning process, in which tasks are associated with role play and interactive communication tasks, providing opportunities for students to learn through experience and gain confidence and communicative skills (Zulianingrum, 2025).

With the recent advances in educational technology, new opportunities for task-based language learning have been provided so that the students can communicate interculturally outside of the classroom. Communication platforms and virtual exchange environments on the Internet provide language learners with direct communication with people whose cultural background is different, thereby providing

opportunities for effective communication and intercultural learning. These experiences can help build one's cultural awareness, communication and digital skills at the same time. Studies on virtual exchange projects have shown that they can be used to facilitate language learning and to foster interaction with students from different cultural contexts, thereby facilitating intercultural understanding (Machwate et al., 2021). These developments have given rise to the interest in studying the learners' experiences of intercultural communication activities that are mediated by digital platforms and the impact of these experiences on the learners' engagement and motivation in these activities.

While there is ample empirical support for task-based language teaching, there are also some challenges in putting such an approach into practice, such as those relating to learner participation, classroom contexts and contextual constraints. Studies in the classroom indicate that the enthusiasm of learners to participate actively in the communicative activity and their motivation from the beginning to the end of the learning process are crucial for implementing task-based approaches with success (Erlam & Tolosa, 2022). The literature reviews also show that task-based language teaching has been used in different learning environments, and the results of the task-based language teaching are generally good in terms of language learning and language skills (Mudinillah et al., 2024). The findings of speaking-based studies also imply that task-based materials can provide opportunities for meaningful interaction and communicative practice for the learners to develop their language skills (Masuram & Sripada, 2020). Task-based Language Teaching (TBTL) has become more and more popular in language teaching in recent years as it continues to be valid and effective as a language teaching method that supports learner-centred and communicative language teaching (Yildiz, 2020).

Presently, there is growing awareness that communicative competence and intercultural communication are closely related aspects of language learning. From recent conversations in the field, it seems that communicative and task-based language teaching is still developing to meet the needs of the learning environment, the advancement of technology, and the needs of communicative language (Teng et al., 2025). Although these developments have taken place, there is little study that has focused on the motivational experiences and perceptions of the learners in a TBL context, based on quantitative and qualitative evidence. Previous research has tended to focus on the achievement of the language, communicative competence or intercultural awareness of the learners as discrete goals, whereas limited research has attempted to look at the process in which learners experience motivation, engagement and intercultural interaction in the same task-based activity settings in an authentic online context.

The present study is an exploration of task-based language learning and its effect on the ESL learners' cultural communication competence. The present study focuses on the students' motivation in relation to intercultural communication activities, their perception of online intercultural interaction, their involvement and motivation during the intercultural communication activities, as well as their expectations of future task-based intercultural communication experiences. The study aims to integrate both quantitative and qualitative evidence to gain a fuller picture of the experiences of the learners in contexts of task-based intercultural communication.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research with this study used mixed methods research because it was a study that aimed to examine the learners' motivation and intercultural communication experiences when engaged in task-based language learning activities. The quantitative part of this study focused on motivational patterns over several interaction sessions, and the qualitative part focused on learners' perceptions, experiences of engagement, and expectations of intercultural communication. The combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence allowed a more holistic picture of

learners' experiences in the task-based intercultural learning contexts.

2.2 Data Source

The data used were from a publicly available study on Chinese English-major students in online intercultural communication tasks with speakers with different cultural backgrounds (Zhao, 2026). The data consisted of multiple samples of learner motivation on six interaction sessions, and open-ended answers about the participants' perception of intercultural interaction, engagement experiences, and expectations for future communication activities. The data can give insight into students' motivational trajectory and their intercultural communication experiences in task-based language learning activities.

2.3 Participants

The study was conducted with 26 English-major students who were dealt with a set of intercultural communication activities based on tasks. All participants were assessed for their motivation at six measurement points and wrote down their reflections about their communication experiences. The sample consists of learners involved in authentic intercultural interaction in the process of learning English.

2.4 Measures

The intervention was measured repeatedly throughout the intervention through the use of scores for motivation measured on six measurement occasions. These scores were analysed in terms of changes and patterns of motivational involvement during involvement in task-based intercultural communication activities. Written reflections of the participants were used to obtain qualitative data. The answers related to perceptions of intercultural interaction in the online setting, engagement and motivation in communication tasks and expectations for future involvement in similar learning tasks. The reflections were used to investigate the experiences of learners in intercultural communication and their understandings of the value of the activities.

2.5 Data Analysis

Means and standard deviations were computed to present descriptive statistics for motivation over the six measurement times. The Shapiro–Wilk test was used to determine if the motivation scores were normally distributed or not. A Friedman test was used since the normality assumption was not met across all measurements; the differences in motivation between measurement occasions were examined. A Kendall's coefficient of concordance was computed to assess the size of the observed effects. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. The responses of the participants were analyzed and coded to find commonalities in experiences, engagement, motivation and expectations about intercultural communication in the future. Codes were grouped together into larger themes, and the frequencies of the themes were computed to facilitate interpretation of the qualitative results. This method allowed the identification of the common experiences and perceptions of the learners with respect to the task-based intercultural communication activities.

3. Results

3.1 Learners' Motivation During Task-Based Intercultural Communication Activities

The learners' motivation was examined by calculating descriptive statistics for six measurement points during the task-based intercultural communication activities. The results presented in Table 1 indicate that the motivation scores did not decrease throughout the intervention, with the mean scores of the participants ranging from 73.08 to 79.12. The highest motivation score was in Measurement Occasion 5 ($M = 79.12$, $SD = 10.16$), and the lowest score was in Measurement Occasion 1 ($M = 73.08$, $SD = 19.76$). Motivational engagement was relatively stable across occasions, although there were some minor fluctuations.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Motivation Scores Across Measurement Occasions

Measurement Occasion	N	Mean	SD
Occasion 1	26	73.08	19.76
Occasion 2	26	77.69	13.64
Occasion 3	26	77.12	12.50
Occasion 4	26	75.65	19.68
Occasion 5	26	79.12	10.16
Occasion 6	26	78.88	11.78

Figure 1 depicts the trend of students' motivation at each of the six time points. There was an overall increase in motivation from O1 to O2, but some reduction in the middle stages of the intervention and a subsequent increase in the latter two. However, the levels of motivation were quite high in all of the task-based intercultural communication activities, regardless of the shifts.

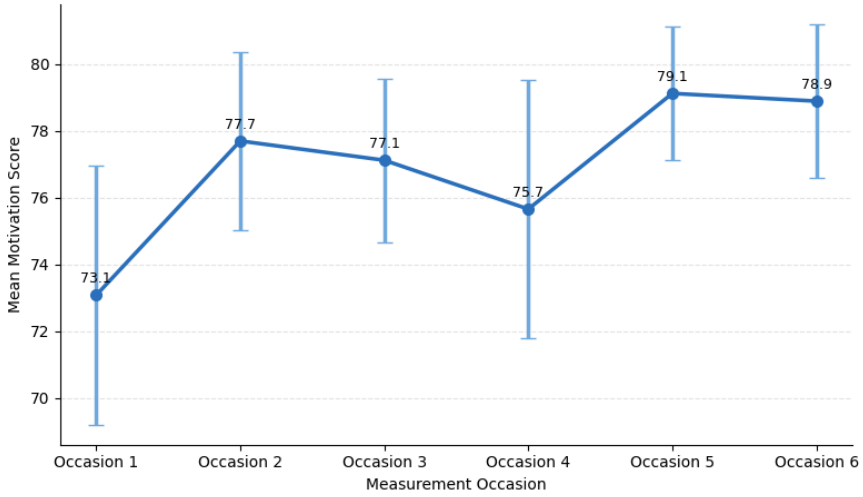

Figure 1. Motivation Trajectory Across Intercultural Tasks

For each measurement occasion, Shapiro–Wilk tests were performed to check data normality, to determine if likely differences exist in motivation across the measurement occasions. Table 2 shows that the three measurement occasions (Occasions 1, 2 and 4) were significantly different from normal, $p < .05$, thus failing to satisfy the assumption of normality.

Table 2. Shapiro–Wilk Normality Test Results

Measurement Occasion	W	p-value
Occasion 1	0.9003	0.0159
Occasion 2	0.9179	0.0401
Occasion 3	0.9687	0.5887
Occasion 4	0.7936	0.0001
Occasion 5	0.9362	0.1088
Occasion 6	0.9749	0.7520

Due to the violation of the normality assumption and the relatively small sample size, a Friedman test was used to analyze the differences between the six measurement occasions of the motivation. There was no statistically significant difference in motivation over time, $\chi^2(5) = 2.52$, $p = .773$. In addition, Kendall's coefficient of concordance showed a very small effect size ($W = .019$). The results indicate that students' motivations remained at the same level during the entire task-based intercultural communication program.

3.2 Learners' Perceptions of Online Intercultural Interaction

Thematic analysis was used to analyse in-depth what learners perceive about online intercultural interaction. As illustrated in Table 3, the most common theme was Cultural Exchange and Promotion (26.1%), followed by English Language Practice (17.4%) and Communication Challenges (17.4%). Other themes that were present were Intercultural Learning, Positive Attitudes Toward Foreign Interaction and Interesting and Enjoyable Experience.

Table 3. Thematic Findings from Learners' Perceptions of Online Intercultural Interaction

Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Cultural Exchange and Promotion	6	26.1
English Language Practice	4	17.4
Communication Challenges	4	17.4
Intercultural Learning	3	13.0
Positive Attitudes Toward Foreign Interaction	3	13.0
Interesting and Enjoyable Experience	3	13.0

Participants often shared that the activities provided them opportunities to introduce Chinese culture, to discuss cultural traditions and to communicate with people from other cultures. Learners also reported the importance of practicing English in real-life communicative contexts. However, it was found that there are some common problems with communication, such as slow response and interruptions in the conversation. Figure 2 shows the distribution of themes concerning the perception of intercultural online communication from the learners' point of view, with cultural exchange and language practice highlighted as being central to the perception of the intercultural interaction of the participants.

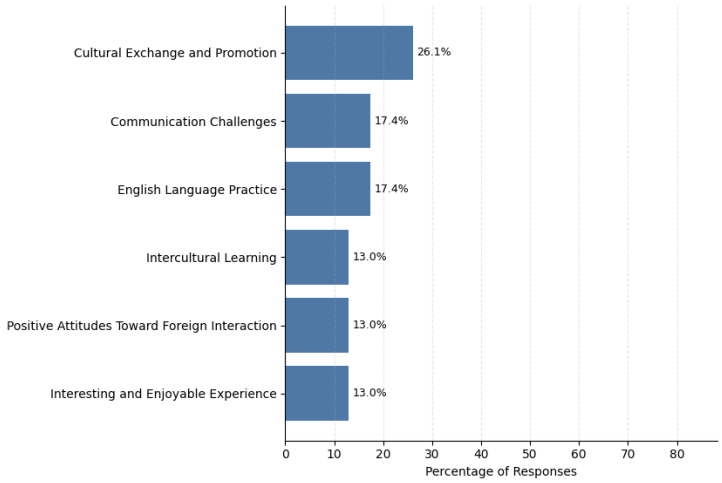

Figure 2. Qualitative Theme Frequencies of Perceptions of Online Intercultural Interaction

3.3 Learners' Engagement and Motivation During Intercultural Interaction

Thematic analysis was employed in examining the learners' experience of emotions and motivation in the intercultural communication activities to further investigate how learners engage in the activities. Table 4 reveals that Motivational Fluctuations were present most often (78.3%), Delayed or Missing Responses next (65.2%), and High Engagement and Enjoyment (52.2%).

Table 4. Thematic Findings on Engagement and Motivation During Intercultural Interaction

Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Motivational Fluctuations	18	78.3
Delayed or Missing Responses	15	65.2
High Engagement and Enjoyment	12	52.2
Positive Emotional Reactions	9	39.1
Interest in Cultural Exchange	8	34.8
Communication Difficulties	6	26.1

While the majority of them reported enjoying and feeling enthusiastic while communicating interculturally, they also provided descriptions of moments when they experienced a drop in motivation because of delayed responses from the other person and interruptions in the communication process. Positive emotional responses were often linked to positive cultural exchanges and effective interactions with foreign interlocutors. The engagement and motivating experiences of intercultural interactions are shown thematically in Figure 3. As can be seen in the figure, the most common parts of learners' experiences that were reported were motivational fluctuations and delayed responses. Qualitative findings also follow patterns seen in quantitative results, indicating that learners' emotions and motivations would change during certain conversations but would not significantly change overall motivation throughout the intervention period.

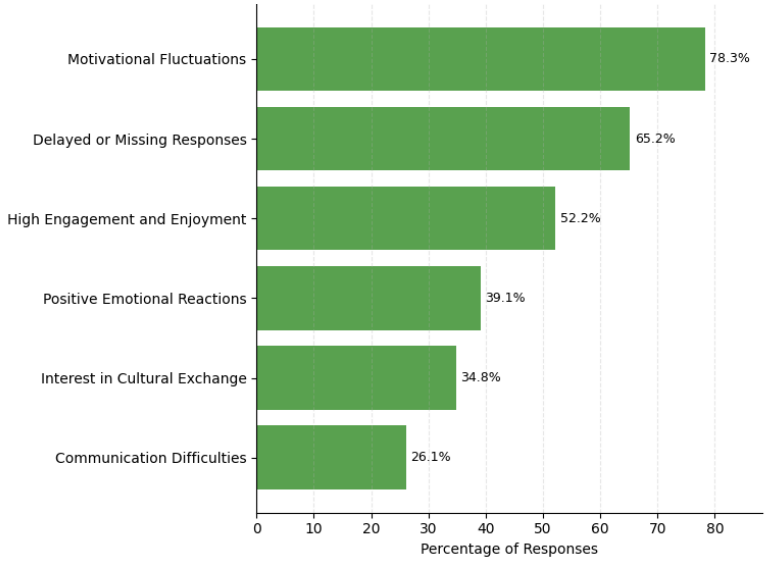

Figure 3. Thematic Distribution of Learners' Engagement and Motivation During Intercultural Interaction

3.4 Learners' Expectations for Future Task-Based Intercultural Communication Activities

The participants also shared their ideas and expectations regarding further task-based intercultural communication activities. From the thematic analysis, it was found that there was a strong desire for greater opportunities for real intercultural communication. The top three expectations were More Opportunities to Communicate with Foreigners (43.5%), Authentic Practical Language Use (34.8%) and Cultural Exchange and Cultural Difference Awareness (30.4%). The students' expectations for future intercultural communication activities based on tasks are shown in Figure 4. In the figure, the most desired characteristics of future instructional activities were opportunities for authentic communication and for real-life language use.

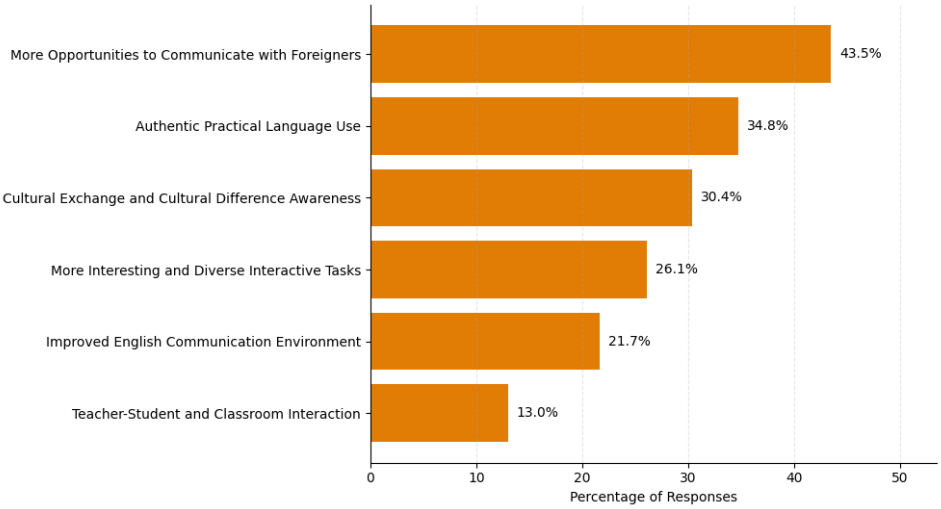

Figure 4. Learners' Expectations for Future Task-Based Intercultural Communication Activities

They wanted to learn more from foreign interlocutors, to have more opportunities for using English in real situations, as well as exposure to cultural differences. Other respondents also suggested including a greater variety of interactive activities and enriching the classroom with a more diverse English-speaking environment. The findings have been combined to conclude that task-based intercultural communication activities were seen by the learners as effective in achieving cultural communication competence and are good for their preparation for future intercultural communication.

4. Discussion

The results show that task-based intercultural communication activities provided a high level of motivation for students throughout the six evaluations. Motivation was slightly different in each of the intervention groups, but there was no significant difference over time by the Friedman test, and there was no effect size. This indicates that there was a general consistency in the attitude of the learners, in terms of their motivation, throughout the task sequence, and it did not show a significant increase or decrease. The temporary increase and decrease shown on each occasion might be a result of the natural fluctuations of learners' emotional and cognitive involvement in the interaction they have with others in the real-time communication task, particularly when the interaction might rely on the external partners and the way in which they respond online. This motivational stability is better understood in terms of the findings from the qualitative results. The activities were often perceived by learners as opportunities for cultural exchange, practising English and learning interculturally. Themes suggest that the tasks were being experienced as substantive and not task-oriented. Many of the activities were highly visible as cultural exchange, which indicates that not only did learners view those activities as learning language, but they also interpreted them as cultural opportunities to

represent Chinese culture, to learn about others, and to engage in real intercultural dialogue. This provides the focus of the title on cultural communication competence, but the results are not necessarily evidence of his or her competence in intercultural communication, but rather his or her experience in intercultural communication. The results also indicate that there were communication challenges and positive engagement. Often there was a delay or lack of response, a lack of the flow of conversation and some instances of miscommunication. It was not these difficulties that seemed to limit general motivation, but rather, they were the difficulties that contributed to the learners' experiences in specific interactions. More opportunities to communicate with foreigners and to use language practically were the strongest expectations for future activities, and the next strongest expectation was for cultural difference awareness. This suggests that the intercultural and communicative aspect of the tasks was important to learners, and they wanted to do more tasks in the same fashion. The results indicate that task-based intercultural communication can provide learners with meaningful motivation, engagement, and cultural communication development opportunities if they are provided with authentic opportunities for intercultural communication.

The finding of a high motivation, but varying across occasions, is in line with the earlier research, which found that motivation in task-supported learning was found to be dynamic rather than static. Similarly, Mohammadzadeh and Alavinia (2021) highlighted that motivational factors of learners can vary within the task-based teaching and learning process due to interactional and classroom situations. The current results also align with the studies on group communicative tasks, in which motivational involvement is modified throughout the process of communication but is influenced by task requirements, peer feedback, and communicative outcome (Guo et al., 2020). The positive impact of task-based activities on keeping students engaged is in line with the research that supports the relationship between task-based language teaching and students' communicative participation and higher motivation to speak. Díaz et al. (2023) concluded that task-based instruction can be used to develop both speaking proficiency and learners' motivation, and Chen and Wang (2019) revealed that TBLT can be a useful means of developing competence when assessment and instruction are oriented towards the communicative goal. The relationship between task participation and communicative engagement in the current study is similar: Learners' repeated focus on English practice and authentic interaction.

The cultural exchange themes are also supported as a strong presence in the research on technology-mediated and intercultural task-based learning. Lopes and Castro (2022) demonstrated that digital intercultural encounters provide affordances for English development, and Harper (2019) maintained that task-based materials can be developed to promote intercultural communicative competence. The present results build on this work, revealing that the learners themselves considered cultural exchange, foreign interaction and awareness of cultural differences to be important aspects of their task experience. The desire of the learners for more authentic communication opportunities is in line with communicative competence and willingness to communicate studies. Based on this result, Yaqobi (2022) concluded that the communicative and technology-intensive task-based approach can foster learners' willingness to communicate in English. Likewise, Cutrone and Beh (2024) found that task-based training has the potential to boost communicative self-confidence and motivation to communicate among EFL learners. The present results substantiate these conclusions, as the activities participants completed were valued, and they were highly enthusiastic about future learning where they would have more direct intercultural experiences. The results also relate to recent research on virtual and hybrid task-based environments. Onthong and Wiboolyasarin (2024) showed that a task-based virtual learning

environment (TB-VLE) can be used to support students' speaking, listening and cultural competence. Yao et al. (2024) also demonstrated that situated learning and task-based language teaching are conducive to the learners' general development. The present results are consistent with the studies above in that task-based intercultural communication is found to be able to engage learners cognitively, emotionally and culturally.

The results have implications for the teaching of ESL. Teachers should develop task-based activities in which learners are asked to communicate in English for meaningful intercultural interaction, and not have it confined to classroom exchanges. Events such as introducing cultures, discussing traditions, problem-solving with fellow foreign countries, and reflecting on communication experience can enhance linguistic self-confidence and intercultural awareness. When digital platforms can reach genuine interlocutors, they can be useful, but the design of the task should take into consideration delayed responses and uneven responses. Clearly communicating goals, being flexible with time, providing language support, and having some structure for reflection can help learners deal with challenges in interaction without losing interest. In addition, curriculum planners should not look at cultural exchange as an extra or optional activity for the development of communicative competence; it should be seen as part and parcel of the communicative competence development process.

There are a couple of caveats. The quantitative findings of the study are generalisable to a small sample of 26 learners. The analysis was done on secondary data; thus, the study was limited to the measures and responses that were already obtained. A competence scale was not used to measure cultural communication competence; it was only guessed by the learners' perception and intercultural experiences. Additional studies should involve more students in larger and more varied samples in various ESL/EFL settings. Additional research could also include the integration of measures of motivation with validated instruments of intercultural competence, interaction logs and interview data. Longitudinal research would be beneficial to study the long-term effects of task-based intercultural communication on the development of the intercultural communicative competence, cultural awareness and confidence of learners.

5. Conclusion

The task-based intercultural communication activities allowed students opportunities to engage in English in real and culturally relevant interactions. Overall, the learners' motivation was found to be very high throughout the six times of measurement, although there were some fluctuations and temporary setbacks due to delayed responses and the lack of communication flow. The qualitative results also indicated that the activities were appreciated as opportunities for cultural exchange, practising language, learning about cultures and interacting with people from other cultures. The results of these studies suggest that task-based language instruction could be of assistance in enhancing learners' intercultural communication experiences by linking the language and cultural expressions with actual interactions. The activities were not designed to practice English as a language, but were aimed at enabling the learners to communicate their ideas, negotiate their understandings of culture and consider differences between contexts. The learners' expectations that they will have more opportunities to communicate with the foreign participants also indicate that authentic intercultural tasks can help to build motivation and readiness for future communication. To sum up, task-based intercultural communication is a very promising approach to ESL teaching, provided that task goals are clearly stated, reflection is structured, and there is a certain number of chances for meaningful interactions.

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