

Engaging in International Projects and Foreign Exchange Programs During and After the Pandemic: Insights and Practices

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study examines the benefits of engaging in various international projects and foreign exchange programs during and after emergencies. International projects and foreign exchange programs are taken as educators' initiatives and professional practices to foster learners' and their growth via an online connection. This research study has presented the personal experiences of an English language teacher's involvement in foreign exchange programs and international projects with global educators to flourish teacher professional development. The anecdotes and lived experiences of an English language teacher are depicted in the form of narratives that enrich the self-data of the researcher. The study explores the benefits of engaging in international projects and foreign exchange programs to promote global collaboration and communication and establish rapport with educators and learners worldwide. Similarly, it shows the significance of fostering 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, digital literacy, language learning, and cultural understanding, and promoting the professional growth of a language teacher during and after the pandemic. This article analyzes the first author's autoethnographic transformative experiences during and after COVID-19. Therefore, the first-person pronoun I represents his stories. At the same time, the role of the second and third authors was supervising his thesis, reading and rereading the article, reviewing, rewriting, editing, and finally submitting and addressing the review comments from the journal. Due to the methodological constraint, we will use the pronoun 'I' in the forecasting statement of the introduction. However, to develop and conceptualize the methodological tool as autoethnography, both the first author, Sujeet Karki, and the third author, Rajesh Sapkota, of the article have contributed.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Autoethnography, English Language Teaching, International Projects, Foreign Exchange Programs

Introduction

The world witnessed the pandemic's long-lasting effects when COVID-19 terrorized the planet at the start of 2020 (WHO, 2020). Agriculture, tourism, health care, industries, and education are just a few sectors disturbed by the outbreak. The WHO has suggested maintaining social distancing, avoiding physical contact, avoiding mass gatherings, and being well aware of the people's need to apply the various precautionary measures to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic further. “The pandemic outbreak of COVID-19 created disruptions in educational activities” (Shrestha et al., 2021, p. 244). As Naciri et al. (2020) mentioned, “, thousands of universities and colleges were closed to encourage social distancing measures and thus limit the spread of the virus (p. 1). “The growing number of tertiary institutions were shut down in regards to face-to-face classes globally” (Ali, 2020, p. 16) due to the spread of the pandemic. The governments have directed all the academic or educational bodies/institutions to stop physical classes and make them available online (Daniel, 2020).

Similarly, Lantsoght et al. (2021) noted that academics were forced to work from home and transition to blended and hybrid teaching due to the COVID-19 epidemic, which necessitated an immediate change in teaching methods and materials. The global teaching-learning processes have undergone an abrupt transformation due to the continuous spreading of COVID-19 (Hassan & Hussain, 2020). Various governmental and private educational institutions have started using e-learning/online platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, MS Teams, and Google Classroom to begin online teaching and learning. The area of online teacher professional development and the stories of teachers facing difficulties and familiarizing themselves with digital tools and resources became the primary concerns and investigations in educational research. However, teacher professional development in Nepal is not prioritised (Neupane, 2023; Neupane & Bhatt, 2023; Neupane & Joshi, 2022). Recently, there have been studies conducted on teacher professional development and identity construction in Nepal (Neupane, 2024; Neupane & Gnawali, 2023; Neupane et al., 2022); however, online teachers' professional development or professional development through digital platforms and resources is uncharted territory.

Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) has transformed all the teaching and learning processes into the online form (Di Pietro et al., 2020). I remember the time when I taught online to my secondary-level learners. It was an unusual situation, and it seemed odd for educators and learners to engage in the virtual platform. Teachers are expected to create unique teaching and learning methods that might require ICT and pedagogical training programs (Li et al., 2021). I was initially confused about how to operate the technological devices and tools (for example, Zoom and Google Classroom). As stated by Allen et al. (2020), “Teachers and teacher educators are transitioning through a particularly uncertain time in terms of their professional lives and work” (p. 233). The rapid changes in the teaching and learning process during the pandemic and the difficulty of preparing for online delivery add burdens and increase the load of teachers. They had to prepare the online resources and materials that could help them during their online teaching (Allen et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled educators and learners to enhance their digital competency and embrace online teaching and learning (Lederman, 2020). I appear to be engaging my time all the time in preparing for the online lessons and assignments for my learners. Later, I became habituated after using digital applications for a long time, which has supported my teacher's professional development. I was curious about different pedagogical practices related to the teaching process during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Several pedagogical practices have been made in English language teaching during the pandemic.

Professional development is defined as a continuous learning process centered on the teacher's formal and informal learning that is sought out and experienced in a stimulating learning environment under complicated and dynamic changing conditions (Fullan, 1995). The concepts and teacher beliefs that will enable them to use their knowledge and abilities to incorporate technology should be a focus of ongoing professional development (Starkey, 2020). According to Singh & Pandey (2013), internet usage will boost teachers' ongoing professional development activities by allowing them to communicate with expert groups and link with wider teaching communities. According to Kohnke (2021), instructors employ technological resources and online learning environments to modify, enrich, and personalize the learning process for students and raise learning standards. Teachers should actively engage in various programs, seminars, and conferences related to ELT. To keep up with developments in the English language teaching sector and advance professionally. They tried to form a group and discuss their teaching expertise and knowledge during the emergency period.

International projects and foreign/cultural exchange programs are taken as good initiatives and practices that global educators have made to foster the growth of both educators and learners during and after the pandemic. As Gokcora (2021) mentioned, "Basically, in online international collaboration, two classrooms connect in different parts of the world" (p. 1). It is the collaboration between two or many countries that was conducted online during emergency times. It plays a vital role in bringing both educators and learners to the international forum. The projects and exchange programs can be made by selecting any topic to present for the educators and learners. Engagement in several online seminars, training, cultural exchange programs, international projects, and workshops or being part of online communities can help to get in touch with the globe to exchange knowledge and ideas (Coşgun & Savas, 2023). Teachers continue participating in various online educational activities and projects and are highly motivated to change themselves and their learners. It can further support updating them with the latest technology, knowledge, and skills, especially during emergency times (Coşgun & Savas, 2023). Technology helps make life easier for educators and learners (Begum, 2016). This is perhaps one of the most important signs that a teacher can change his teaching methods and methods according to the need and change of time. With the help of digital knowledge and skills, both educators and learners can investigate the information and explore various global sessions and projects to enhance the level of their learners. In addition, they contributed to their approach and increased the professional development of teachers.

This research study aims to explore the significance of engaging in various international projects and foreign exchange programs during and after COVID-19. Based on this purpose, the following research question was formulated: How do international projects and foreign exchange programs benefit educators and learners during and after the pandemic?

Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning theory (ELT) offers a comprehensive model of the learning process and adult development. It relies on what we know about how people learn, grow, and develop (Kolb et al., 2014). Experience is the central concern of this theory. As McCarthy (2010) stated, "ELT defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 132). "Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984). ELT is intended to be a holistic, adaptive process of learning that merges experience, perception, cognition, and behavior (McCarthy, 2010). Kolb's experiential learning theory emphasizes the influence of our experiences, including thoughts, emotions, and environment, on learning (Kolb, 1984). "Experiential learning theory emphasizes the importance

of direct experience and reflection in the learning process” (Orhani & Shatri, 2024, p. 281). According to Kolb, the individual passes through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The learner needs to complete the entire cycle to create the learning in a meaningful way (McCarthy, 2010).

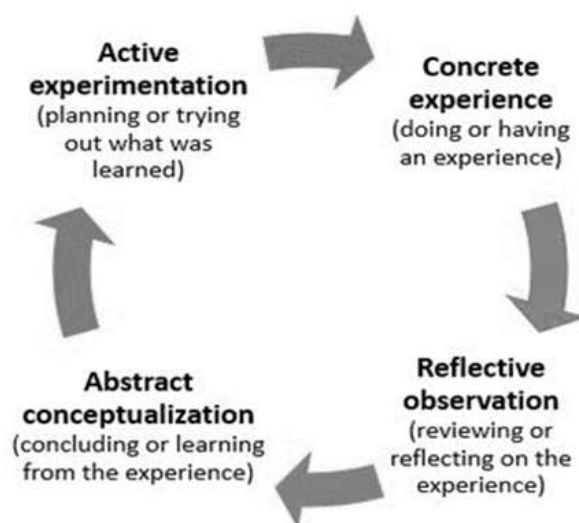


Figure 1. Kolb’s Four stages of learning

Source: (Kolb, 1984; Kurt, 2022)

The experiential theory links well with this research study as the researcher's experience has been discussed throughout the study concerning the role of international projects and foreign exchange programs in uplifting professional growth. The experience provided a thorough description of my personal life and how I felt after I had collaborated with my global colleagues in an international forum. This research study has presented the personal experiences of a language teacher involved in foreign exchange programs and several international projects to flourish teacher professional development. The experiences were recollected from the memories and reflected based on the available screenshots and information on social media. I hope this adds the description to enrich the data and provides valuable knowledge about the benefits of conducting international projects and foreign exchange programs with global colleagues and learners via the online platform.

Methodology

Autoethnography as a Method of Inquiry

According to Cooper & Lilyea (2022), autoethnography is a form of narrative research. This type of research can include our anecdotes, which can resemble our lived experiences during the pandemic. Autoethnography offers a way to make a positive difference in both your life and the wider world (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As Méndez (2013) stated, “The aim of autoethnography is to recreate the researcher’s experience reflexively, aiming at making a connection to the reader which can help him or her to think and reflect about his or her own experiences” (p. 284). According to Qutoshi (2015), an autoethnographic journey helps one to reflect on both past and current experiences critically and to bring about a paradigm change in one's way of thinking, believing, and perceiving the world. The anecdotes and real-life teaching encounters of a teacher are presented in the autoethnographic research.

Autoethnography is an effective method for expressing analytical, social, personal, and professional insights. By allowing the subject to speak in the first person, 'I' autoethnography gives the subject a voice. To support this, in autoethnography writing, the writer and investigator must necessarily demonstrate their hand or voice up front (Dyson, 2007). In autoethnography, authors take on the role of storytellers and narrators who are free to share their emotions, experiences, and daily activities. Autoethnography provides a way for authors to express their true selves through reflections, positively impacting themselves and the world (Ellis & Bochner, 2011). Hayler's (2011) argument is that teachers can examine their memories and beliefs to gain valuable insights into the work, identity, and narratives through which we recognize ourselves and our task in the form of rich descriptions and perspectives. Autoethnography transforms the observer and researcher's views from outsider to insider. In this approach, autoethnography is a kind of qualitative research that values the researcher's inner knowledge, biases, subjectivities, etc. (Harrison et al., 2022).

Autoethnographic research plays a vital role in writing our self-narratives and documenting memories, and lived experience in the written form. As Raab (2013) mentioned, "Writing self-narratives and documenting the narratives of others facilitates a deeper knowing and understanding of those in a given culture or group" (p. 5). Personal experiences make us reflect on ourselves and what we think about something (Chase, 2011). Utilizing autoethnography, I have explored my experiences and memories of engaging in several international projects and foreign/cultural exchange programs, which have flourished and helped me flourish in my professional development as a language teacher.

Data Generation Techniques and Process

I used my narratives, memories, and lived experiences of participating and meaningfully engaging in several international projects conducted in various countries like Poland, the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. Participating in such international projects and foreign exchange programs provided meaningful interaction with global colleagues and learners. I wanted to uncover these experiences by contextualizing the pandemic through writing this autoethnographic research study. As Tarisayi (2023) mentioned, "Autoethnography utilizes the researcher's own life experiences as primary data" (p. 57). I have used my life stories and screenshots of the sessions to provide the evidence to support this research study.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis process, I used the thematic analysis of my narratives and the experiences that I reflected on from my memories and lived experiences during and after the pandemic. Thematic analysis is a scientific method to discover and arrange insights into significant topics throughout the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I have employed the Gibbs (2008) framework for the thematic analysis of my narratives in this study. At first, I looked for my incidents and experiences during and after the pandemic and recounted many images, personal feelings, and explanations of the present day. Then, as Gibbs (2008) states, to prepare a summary to identify the story's start, mid, and end, I have done accordingly to get the main incidents and happenings of my memories and experiences related to participating in the international and foreign exchange sessions. I tried to make self-reflections from organizing the artifacts to presenting my involvement in international projects and exchange programs chronologically. I have collected some artifacts, like screenshots of the program session, by visiting different social media sites. After that, I looked for the main thematic concepts and highlighted the emotive language and feelings in that particular incident. Then, they take notes or memos about the ideas and opinions generated (Gibbs, 2008).

Similarly, I have coded the main thematic ideas and highlighted the main notions and concepts that were taken out from the coding process. Then, I developed the broader thematic concepts based on the engagement in the online sessions. I have kept my research objective in mind while writing about my experiences, which have guided me further in the journey. Finally, I tried to interpret my experiences, themes, and reflections by referencing various scholarly ideas and opinions that I presented in the discussion section. In this way, the data analysis process was carried out to get the insights and the major experiences that I have personally felt and reflected on during and after the pandemic.

Narratives of My Professional Journey through ICT

In this chapter, I have mentioned the various international projects and foreign exchange programs I have done through global collaboration with educators from the USA, Myanmar, Poland, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. I have simply jotted down my wonderful experiences through the narratives which have supported my professional career. Some of the benefits that I found during my professional journey were: fostering 21st-century skills, global networking, language learning, cultural understanding and awareness and promoting digital literacy among educators and learners.

Engaging in the Foreign International Projects- A Move Ahead!

Scrolling online and searching for information seems beneficial as I have various sites to develop and enhance my digital skills and knowledge. In addition, I got the message through the GQCC (Global Quarantine Conversation Club) Facebook group that they were launching a collaborative international project titled “Ocean Preservation.” “Virtual projects are composed of team members dispersed geographically and working in different organizations” (Binder, 2016).

The research conducted by Pant et al. (2023) showed that educators enhanced various ICT skills and developed their projects during the pandemic, which seemed to be significant. The learners were able to enhance their learning process by taking part in various projects. I tried to join the projects for the betterment of all, and my learners could learn something as well. So, I got the information about the project concept and chose eight secondary-level learners from Grade- XI (out of them, five were boys and three were girls from my school). I thought it would be a great platform for my learners to learn from such international projects. Additionally, I aim to enhance our country's recognition on the international stage. I informed them about the details related to that international project, which I got from the project coordinator. The learners seemed to be energetic and dedicated to completing the international projects. They worked together and divided their tasks equally, ensuring timely project completion. They managed their time and got constructive feedback in the Facebook messenger from my side to bring improvement to the project. I could see how passionate they were during the project.

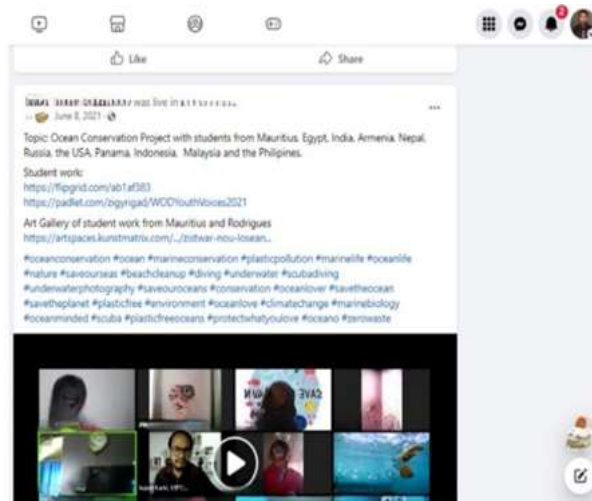


Figure 2. Ocean Preservation Project Discussion with the Global Educators

Source: (Kassabian, 2021)

Most of the schools had participated in these projects and they were locating all the pictures and collaborators on the world map location. It was thrilling! My country was there on the map! Several artworks by my students about the promotion and preservation of the ocean and all living things on Earth were submitted for the completion of the project. My learners had never taken part in such international projects. Still, they had done their best artwork and displayed them by locating them in the particular Google form and other online sites.



Figure 3. Video submitted from Nepal for the Ocean Preservation Project

Source: (Flip, n.d.)

Moreover, I was inquiring with them about other international projects where I could create a platform for my learners to join. I listened to another project from Myanmar with different concepts like “Peace and the absence of war,” and COVID-19 pandemic experiences to foster the learners’ creativity via various means, such as preparing a short video clip and their perceptions through art. At first, I along with my learners, were confused about how to make the project successful. But, with the interaction and collaboration among the project head, teachers, and learners, we initiated the crucial step and made the project successful. International projects provided learners with a valuable opportunity to share their voices and experiences on the related topic. Similarly, it promotes a sense of collaboration and cooperation among colleagues and educators regarding the

concept of projects and makes it possible to lead vibrantly. Eight learners from Grade- XI had planned accordingly to complete the project under my supervision.

The students were actively enhancing their 21st-century skills, including communication, collaboration with international peers, and fostering creativity. At the same time, I focused on building relationships with educators worldwide to learn from diverse perspectives and innovative approaches, establishing myself as an engaged contributor in international educational circles. Simultaneously, I remained dedicated to maintaining my teaching identity, and all of these efforts were supported by effectively using information and communication technology (ICT).

The blessings of ICT create lots of opportunities for educators and learners during and after the pandemic. We were continuously moving for our professional growth via online, physical, and sometimes in the blended mode. After the pandemic, I was teaching my learners in a physical classroom. However, I continuously engaged to interact with my global colleagues virtually. My global colleagues also supported me in sharing their forum. Luckily, I got information about one international project- “My Place on the World’s Map”- launched - in coordination with IELTSA Poland and the IELTSA Teachers’ Development Department. The message was received through the WhatsApp and Messenger groups. I expressed my enthusiasm for participating in that project. I contacted the Polish educator, and finally, she expressed her gratitude for my being a part of such an international project.

I had instructed my Grade- XI learners on how to move ahead with that international project. The students divided the groups themselves and carried out their respective responsibilities. They had well-designed and covered the contents related to that topic. There were altogether ten learners involved in that project. They were energetic, dedicated, and motivated while engaging in the project. I could feel it during the project! Finally, by addressing all the comments and constructive feedback, they completed the “My Place on the World’s Map” project. IELTSA Poland and the educator from Poland were pleased to see the beautifully designed projects prepared by my Grade- XI learners. Engaging in these sorts of international projects gave me immense pleasure to be a part of a global educator forum, and involved my learners to continue working, communicating, and collaborating with global colleagues.



Figure 4. Project submitted to IELTSA Poland on “My Place on the World’s Map”

Source: (Ielta Poland, 2024)

Collaboration with IELTA Philippines and IELTA Nepal

One of the Filipino educators named Dennis (Pseudonym) texted me a message about his first Global Collaboration session on the topic of history, education, and culture, which was a part of the IELTA Students Forum. I accepted the invitation as I was familiar with this type of session from the start. I liked the topic to which I had chosen for the session. I wanted to engage learners to be the speakers in the international arena, so, I chose a few learners (from grade- XI) to be the speakers on the respective topic. The learners were looking forward to meeting their Filipino colleagues and sharing their thoughts and opinions about their respective countries' history, education, and culture.

I need to teach them the right guidelines since this is their first experience of being a global speaker in an online forum. Finally, the day came when I was engaged with my learners to participate in the worldwide collaboration session with IELTA Nepal and IELTA Philippines. The session was wonderful! The learners from both countries participated well in presenting their assigned topic to other participants. It was a great collaboration between Nepal and Indonesia. Each learner from the two countries made the cultural exchange, and they were well-familiar with the history and educational practices of the country, too. They can even foster their 21st-century skills like communication, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and enhancing their digital skills in real life. At the end of the session, the e-certificate of appreciation was distributed to the presenters. Overall, the program was successful due to the active participation of both learners and educators.

Similarly, my learners were representing me in another session which was going to be held on 30th September, 2023 (7:15 am New York time). The topic for the presentation was: “World Englishes: My English for the World,” which was followed by three guiding questions. There were a total of four presenters - two participants from Nepal and two from Lebanon. It was the first time that IELTA Nepal was going to represent the learners in the IELTA Students Forum. I had not expected that the students would be presented with such vibration and energy. But my thinking was wrong as they had given their best to make the presentation enthralling! They created visually appealing slides and included various relevant content related to the session’s topic.

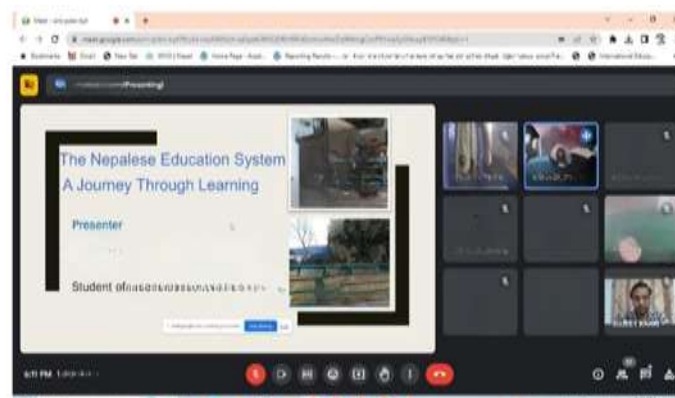


Figure 5. Students Presenting in the International Students’ Forum

Source: (IELTA Nepal, 2023)

Though it was time-consuming, they covered all the contents beautifully. I assisted them in developing the presentation content, which encompassed various aspects of World Englishes. The educator from Malaysia named Joana (Pseudonym) appreciated my students’ presentation. I feel

proud of myself for this achievement! I was fostering my learners' ability to compete with them on the global platform. This was all possible due to ICT! And the involvement in the international arena!



Figure 6. Students' Comments from the IELTA Nepal Website

Source: (IELTA Nepal branch office, n.d.)

Getting involved in the foreign exchange programs!

The foreign exchange programs were at a high level during and after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many global educators were engaged in preparing and conducting several global collaborations with colleagues from around the world. Despite having diverse geographical areas, cultures, languages, and ethnic backgrounds, global educators had planned to conduct foreign exchange programs among the countries. They tried to maintain a harmonious relationship and connections with each other to promote inclusivity. I was in touch with several colleagues from different parts of the world, so I got easy access to them to learn about the idea of collaborating with the help of global exchange programs. The journey was continued towards achieving professional growth. Through the connection with global educators and learners, I was invited to be a collaborator in one of the cultural exchange programs in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. We collectively agreed to schedule the session following our Zoom meetings. We have even decided to call one of the educators from Poland as a guest.

The Poland educator accepted our warm invitation to participate in the program. We also provided the learners with program guidelines and specified the topics to be covered in the cultural exchange programs. All these things happened so quickly and smoothly that we were able to make a global collaboration between three countries. I was thrilled to involve my students in the cultural exchange program. It was my first meeting! I felt so happy! Utilizing the leisure time that I had! Meeting with educators from two countries online! The learners were enthusiastic too to make their presentation about the geographical boundary, food, dress, religions, ethnic groups, festivals, animals, and birds of the respective countries. We ran the cultural exchange session through the Zoom platform as it was easier for all to know how to operate the video meeting through the platform. The global learners had prepared their best by sharing their opinions about the country. We were all listening to them, appreciating their beautiful PowerPoint presentation.

Similarly, one of the educators named Ferry (Pseudonym) from Indonesia reached out to me via Facebook Messenger to collaborate on a cultural exchange program between Indonesia and Nepal.

Wow! It was fantastic! I already have a few ideas about how to run the session. Additionally, I can meet new colleagues from Indonesia. This is an important step for me to broaden my horizons further. So, I accepted the invitation and planned and scheduled the program. Ferry even guided me with some topics to be covered in the session. The topics are the same as in the previous section, such as religions, national participants, languages, places, festivals, goods, animals, and birds. Finally, Teacher Ferry from Indonesia shared the flyer related to our cultural exchange meeting. We had jointly run the session together.

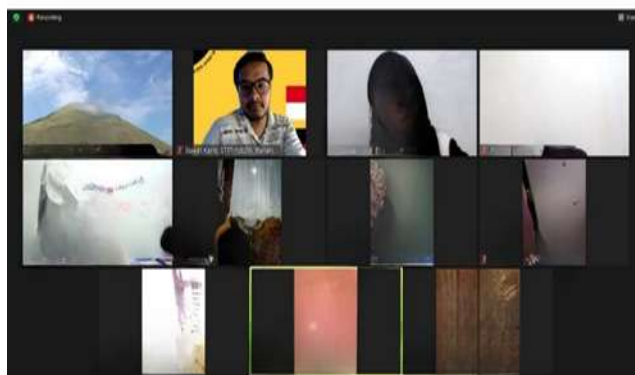


Figure 7. Discussion with the Indonesian educator and learners

Source: (Karki, 2021)

The learners covered their topics well and gave a marvellous presentation. I was proud of their hard work and efforts to make the session interesting. Similarly, Ferry and I had run another intercultural exchange meeting between Nepal and Indonesia. It was our second intercultural meeting. We discussed our respective countries further, but the learners' age groups were different. They were adult learners who had taken part in the second session. The session was well and informative! Moreover, I received an invitation from teacher Fah (Pseudonym) from Malaysia to contribute to one of the cultural exchange programs between Malaysia and Nepal. It was a collaboration session. My learners and I learned about Malaysian culture and other things like foods, festivals, location, geographical features, natural beauty, ethnic groups, musical instruments, etc. I was given a certificate of appreciation for contributing as the facilitator during the cultural exchange program. Similarly, I had even engaged and contributed to a language learning and cultural exchange project in the e-meet from which I was given the tag “Teacher Inspirer”. This was one of the fruitful results that I got from the global session.

The next opportunity knocks on the door! The teachers from Vietnam and other global educators from different corners of the world contributed to letting the learners (junior group and senior group) flourish in each other's culture and describing the country's information to all the global learners and educators. This session was informative as the global learners got the golden opportunity to learn about language skills. At the same time, they engaged in a cultural exchange and gained an understanding of different countries. We jointly planned for the educator to present information about their countries using a PowerPoint presentation. I have to prepare my significant plan to talk about my country with my global colleagues. We had a meeting to discuss our program agenda, and finally, we were informed by the program coordinator about our respective schedules.

Finally, the day came when I got the chance to present my country, Nepal. I delivered the session two times- junior and senior level separately. They enjoyed the session, and I answered the questions that they raised after the session. Thus, the session was insightful and even, and I even got the opportunity to establish a rapport with the global learners. Similarly, another collaborative session was “Developing the 21st Century Skills for Teenagers” with two teachers from Indonesia and Nepal. The topic was related to a person's physical and emotional changes, and the second issue was related to personal freedom. There were altogether seven/seven learners from both countries. It was exciting and gave the platform for educators and learners to flourish in their professional growth. They were, at the same time, enhancing their digital skills and knowledge about the respective topics. They got the chance to present the topic by collaborating with their colleagues and exchanging ideas with each other. The learners develop a sense of rapport with the learners from Indonesia.

Additionally, they are known to give their views in the diverse context of another culture. I also benefited from learning from them and connecting with two teachers from Indonesia. They can even let my learners be a part of the international arena and flourish their diverse skills in the global community. It has been a great platform for me to build rapport with my global colleagues and try to enhance my pedagogical skills and knowledge. The global exchange programs via online platforms have established my teacher identity to be unique to other educators and try to lead my learners to cultivate their 21st-century skills. They could stand in front of their global colleagues as independent learners themselves. I could expect similar sorts of programs in the upcoming days! Overall, it was a significant program and will forever create a memory in my life!

Results and Discussion

The paradigm shift in my teaching, getting in touch with global professionals and digital technologies and launching various international projects with global colleagues and foreign exchange programs between the countries can be the area for doing the research. I have reflected on my past experiences and memories of the pandemic related to these areas through the support of autoethnographic research. As González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya (2022) argued, “The 21st-century skills, knowledge, and attitudes are necessary for citizens to face the digital, sustainable, and social world ethically and humanistically” (p. 5). These skills are highly essential and required for both educators and learners to adjust to the present day. I can integrate 21st-century skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and digital literacy into the language classroom.

ICT, in the words of Hashim (2021), “prepares the way for a move from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach” (p. 54). I minimized the STT (Student Talking Time) in comparison to TTT (Teacher Talking Time). I allowed the learners to let their voices and develop self-confidence and fluency in speaking the English language. I was able to manage students by giving them opportunities to talk or present topics or materials. But now, I have assigned some of the course topics for the learners to make the presentation individually or in groups. They can engage themselves to prepare the contents and present in front of the class. They can work together in groups and create presentation slides in PowerPoint. Digital skills can be fostered and they try to learn how to deal with problems. They can improve their communication skills whenever they give presentations in front of their colleagues.

There was effective communication among the learners to convey their ideas verbally through the presentation. “Effective communication through group presentations and discussions to work together and collaborate with technology” (Khoiri et al., 2020, p. 7) is the concern of the present

day. The 4Cs skills (collaboration, creativity, communication, and critical thinking) are essential for preparing 21st-century professionals and fostering their abilities (Khoiri et al., 2020).to prepare 21st-century professionals and help them.



Figure 8. Comments from an Indonesian educator platform about the global session

Source: (Deisyi, 2021)

In the 21st century, there were various significant changes in the field of education. We are aware of this as the epidemic has forced us to switch from traditional school settings to online ones. As d’Orville (2020) argued, “The virus-induced disruption offers an opportunity for all actors in the education sector to rethink the system and discuss how to educate future generations” (p. 13). Teachers must expand beyond their physical classrooms to stay informed about the global scenario. Global awareness could be efficient through the help of global communication with other educators or maybe through engaging in several projects globally with the learners (Cook et al., 2016).

Global collaboration is greatly needed in the field of education. It is necessary to connect with global colleagues by being members of various teacher associations (Karki et al., 2024). The educators and learners could move from a specific to a broader environment to explore their knowledge and skills and foster a good rapport and connection with their global colleagues. Cook et al. (2016) mentioned, “the global collaboration experiences foster adaptability, effective communication, creative problem solving, technological proficiency, and cultural empathy” (p. 20). We could adjust to the international periphery where there were high chances to understand each other’s culture through the sense of communication. We could work together on some projects and could offer creative solutions to solve the problems. “Effective online collaboration is a valuable instructional approach appropriate for 21st-century teaching and learning” (Neal et al., 2013, p. 533).

The necessity of educators in the 21st century was to move beyond the delivery of subject matters and enable the learners to communicate in the global scenario from which they could expand their horizon of knowledge to promote their learning (Neal et al., 2013). As Cook et al. (2016) argued, “Global collaboration in education aims to improve learning, break down classroom walls, and develop authentic audiences” (p. 1). So, the virtual platform during and after the pandemic could lead me to move beyond the classroom and let me discover things in the international forum. Engaging with learners globally and embracing social media to establish connections with international associations was necessary.

Sahin & Han (2020) have highlighted that there is a need for 21st-century teaching and learning skills for EFL educators to create a fruitful learning environment for the learners. Educators should be active in discussing the current pertinent topics and issues to interact according to the changing times through the use of various educational technologies (Sahin & Han, 2020). The research study of Motallebzadeh et al. (2018) showed the importance of critical thinking, decision-making, collaboration, communication, and project-based instruction for ELT classrooms. I found these

qualities and values when I engaged my learners in several projects and foreign exchange programs. For this, teachers should use appropriate technology in the language classroom. Sometimes I use classroom activities, games, brainstorming questions, or icebreakers in the language class to stimulate students' interest. I used the previous knowledge I learned through information and communication technology to improve teaching and learning.

My teaching practices have now changed in comparison to the traditional practices. I was incorporating the new teaching techniques and styles to modify the learning process. At the same time, technology was blended into language teaching and learning. As a part of teacher education, it should be directed towards the student's needs and try to incorporate ICT knowledge and skills for enhancing 21st-century skills (Palmer, 2015). In comparison to the past, my learners were eager to learn new things through group discussion, engaging in the team project, raising their queries, making Google searches, and supporting each other to enhance their learning. In addition to introducing digital platforms, they also introduced ideas about learning by doing. The learners collaborate with other colleagues to foster their learning process and try to learn unique things from each other. The various learner-centered projects and webinars "bring learners into common online spaces to hear live presenters and ask questions" (Brasili & Allen, 2019).

Similarly, students can develop the skills to interact with friends and teachers in the world and try to have new ideas and skills that will help change and change their learning. As Sulaiman and Ismail (2020) mentioned, "The 21st-century skills are the heartbeat for teachers to improve the quality of teaching in line with current educational developments" (p. 3537). Educational institutions can help to foster diverse skills to meet the demand according to the changing circumstances (Sulaiman & Ismail, 2020). Furthermore, it evokes the students' engagement and fosters motivation among learners. It can enhance the competencies of teachers to develop their professional growth (Arbaa et al., 2017). This is what I want to see in teaching and learning! I can learn from them and gain new experience engaging in those international projects and foreign exchange sessions!

Teachers' knowledge may be expanded through various professional development activities, which can greatly influence their educational practices (Drew, 2023). Many teachers attended the virtual sessions, which kept them uplifted in their teaching careers and fostered their personal and professional development. Professional development activities for teachers are essential for better educational development, which is greatly necessary (Van et al., 2022). This can automatically enhance their teaching career. The professional engagement in the various online conversational clubs, interviews, national and international projects, foreign exchange programs, ELT conferences, and training has played a pivotal role in my growth and, thus, made me capable of having continuity in the field of teacher professional development.

Moreover, networking with teachers from home and abroad plays a significant role in the life of a teacher. I was creating a space in the national and international forum to develop a rapport with them I got during the pandemic. I have developed close connections with educators from various countries like India, Indonesia, Armenia, Poland, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Japan, Morocco, and many more. The wise use of virtual communication during and after the pandemic has led to positive perceptions and engagements among people in the area of online professional development (Elsayary et al., 2024). After establishing the global networks via online mode, I maintained a positive relationship while conducting several national and international projects, cultural exchange programs and webinars in the country. Through the help of networking among national and international educators, I seek several opportunities for my professional growth and career.

Global communication among foreign educators and learners has provided me with ample opportunities to establish good connections and enhance my professional career. I frequently lead meetings and conversations with global educators to discuss pedagogical ideas as well as other pertinent issues of the teaching and learning process. I collaborated with them to participate in various national and international projects, which enhanced my familiarity with several unique ideas. I participated with my learners to prepare their projects and present them in front of international educators. In the words of Neal et al. (2013), “Collaborative online learning promotes opportunities for students... to support their knowledge building” (p. 538). They even played the role of speakers to share their ideas and experiences in the IELTA Students’ Forum as well as in online conversational clubs. The students’ participation in an online forum helps them to foster their critical thinking skills and enables them to think deeply (Onyema et al., 2019). As d’Orville (2020) mentioned, “... this crisis is a new opportunity for international collaboration” (p. 14). The global communication and collaboration on the various international projects and foreign exchange programs thus support the academic and pedagogical transformation in my life, which has enhanced both my career and the academic journey of my learners.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a huge transformation in the lives of educators and learners. It has opened great access for educators to switch to national and international forums. Based on the discussion and reflection above, there were numerous pros of participating in foreign exchange programs and international projects connecting in the online platform. The educators tried to foster global communication and collaboration with global colleagues by getting in touch with several international projects which were prepared for the learners. Moreover, foreign/cultural exchange programs play a pivotal role in exchanging ideas and opinions, and diverse cultures and systems from one country to another. These sorts of global collaboration among the different countries can help maintain the harmonious relationship between educators and learners and uplift the teacher’s professional development. Similarly, the learners are building strong networks with foreign teachers and letting their diverse voices come into the international arena. These types of projects and exchange programs help to grow the cultural awareness among the countries and try to exchange and support each culture to maintain the rapport between the countries. Based on my personal experience, I found that the shy and hesitant learners were able to speak in front of their colleagues and enhance their self-confidence. They would be able to remove their fear of speaking in front. Moreover, this can further improve their language skills like speaking, reading, and listening which can further improve their academic performance.

This research study has provided significant insights and reflections on English language teachers’ participation in various international projects and foreign exchange programs among countries during and after the COVID-19 pandemic which makes him/her distinct from other teachers and further promotes the teacher identity. The results of the study have implications for teacher education, curriculum designers and policymakers who can design ICT policies in the educational field and try to integrate the significant role of technology in enhancing the language development and academic level of the learners. Furthermore, the various types of national and international projects as well as foreign/cultural exchange programs can be done with the various foreign countries to develop intercultural awareness among educators and learners.

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