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Communicating in English as a Second Language Aboard a European Cruise Line: An Autoethnographic Sketch

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Abstract

Working aboard an international cruise ship that travels to Europe is an exciting adventure with the many wonderful ports of call to visit, exquisite dining experiences, and a multitude of crew members who come from different countries. Because they have to serve foreign guests, crewmembers speak English frequently. This paper is an autoethnographic sketch of a pianist who works in an international cruise line and befriends a Polish musician who has English language issues such as inability to pronounce correct English words and phrases, excessive use of non-verbal cues in communication, and a generally low English comprehension level, but with an inquisitive spirit to learn the second language, the two communicators manage to foster a mutual understanding. Narratives are drawn from self-reflections, analyzed and interwoven as a self-culture assemblage of cross-cultural communication. Results of the study reveal that interpersonal communication hovers within diverse cultural settings despite certain language impediments, emphasizing that the English language as a second language spoken by both second language speakers tends to eliminate speech anxiety. European crew members mingling with multi-cultural individuals establish good interactive skills while fostering good relationships while they learn practical English in the exercise of their daily duties.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication; European cruise; English as a second language

What the Literature Says

Cruise ships are carriers of clearly defined, yet usually not explicitly addressed on-board cultures, which are mostly in dramatic contrast to the everyday culture of the destinations (Kowollik & Jonas, 2016). Cross-cultural communication explores how people from different cultures communicate, perceive, and interpret things around them (Sahadevan & Sumangala, 2021). Effective communication can be realized if the strategies and methods of communication are used appropriately (Nuryana et al., 2017). In the context of cross-cultural communication aboard a luxury liner, the international cruise industry has the characteristics of international integration. This kind of integration is not only reflected in the internationalization of the staff, but also in the diversified source of tourists (Zhao & Wang, 2020). For example, the interaction between Indonesian crew on Holland America Line cruise ships as immigrants with European crew in general, especially with Dutch crew who became the origin of the State flag as the

identity of the ship as a native in the Holland America Line has been going on since the 1970s when the Company began to hire and hire crew from Indonesia (Nuryana et al., 2017). In the case of Polish individuals speaking English as a second language, English and Polish differ in terms of pronunciation (e.g., vowel-based vs. consonant-based), spelling (e.g., opaque vs. semi-transparent), grammar (e.g., fixed vs. flexible word order), syntax (e.g., analytic vs. synthetic), and vocabulary (Jaskulska, 2017).

Methodological Route

This paper is a qualitative study using autoethnography as an inquiry method. Autoethnographic writing is a scientific method which contextualizes experiences in cultural, social, political and personal history (O'Hara, 2018). In this study, personal stories were collected as fragments of memory recollection, retrieved and analyzed to depict a self-culture assemblage of knowledge and experience. As an international pianist who has worked in international cruise lines playing in various lounges aboard the ship, I examined the depth of my experiences and explored relationships of my personal reality with cultural nuances, symbolizing an intricate web of understanding facets of my musical journey. In terms of language acquisition, I utilized my mother tongue in everyday conversations with family and friends, but when I entered school, I learned to speak in English because it was the academic language used, for instance, in classroom communication with teachers and classmates in formal learning. The use of English was met with struggles due to my strong mother tongue influence. However, I managed to survive the language ordeal. As I mentioned in my previous ethnographies in this column (e.g., Olobia, 2024), I was born and raised in the Philippines, where several languages and dialects are spoken by the local population, including English, one of the official languages. In terms of language acquisition, I utilized my mother tongue, Tagalog, in everyday conversations with family and friends, but when I entered school, I learned to speak in English because it was the academic language used, for instance, in classroom communication with teachers and classmates in formal learning. The use of English was met with struggles due to my strong mother tongue influence. However, I managed to survive the language ordeal.

Musical Sojourn

I worked on a cruise ship as a cocktail pianist for many years in the past. My job was to entertain guests who were mostly Europeans, and my music repertoire, which I played in the different lounges of the luxury liner, included European classics composed by Chopin, Bach, and other world-famous classical composers alongside American Broadway tunes, popular melodies, as well as some jazz music to cater to wide listeners.

France, Russia, and Spain were among the many European nations the ship visited during its extended travels. My other crew members, who were largely musicians, and I would go ashore to spend the day in various European restaurants and bars, dining and drinking, throughout the three months that we visited seaports. Many European visitors who were also ship passengers and I spoke with each other on many occasions. Our chat was vibrant and engaging by the fact that some of them knew me as a pianist.

Communicating With Guests

In the many restaurants that I performed in around the ship, I interacted with a variety of European guests. Since English was one foreign language that they frequently used and because it was a prerequisite for employment in the cruise industry for crew members, these exchanges, focused on music requests and travel stories, were conducted in English. I recall being fascinated by the many accents, pronunciations, and speech patterns that European visitors would apply to the dialogue. I also noticed from their speech that English was not their first language because they were from parts of Europe where English was not a popular choice. Apart from geographical location, there was hesitation, silence between words, and general reservation to speak in a more spontaneous manner as would normally happen in first-language speakers.

In the beginning, it was a challenging experience to engage in a fruitful conversation for many reasons. First, being sensitive to the person's level of English proficiency was always paramount to any good relationship. In fact, proficiency was defined through the speed of utterance, choice of words, and spontaneity. Thus, if someone spoke slowly, I would usually imitate the gesture as a way of showing respect and not to intimidate the person I was talking to. Moreover, it was not only the words I uttered, but nuances of my behavior also manifested. For example, while speaking in English, there were some non-verbal cues like hand gestures, facial expressions, and general body movements that confirmed with what I was talking about. As a second-language speaker myself, these gestures were construed as effective communication

skills as well. Second, knowing that these European guests travelled the high seas with me, I assumed that our level of English proficiency was basically the same or at least, close. Somehow, I did not feel I was dominant to them, rather, I felt that we were on equal footing on account of our status as second-language speakers. In fact, I received the same gesture of kindness, warmth, and understanding, as manifested in our enlivened conversations. When we were both looking for the right word to say, for instance, there was a lot of spontaneous laughter in the middle. Third, I observed that European guests were generally demonstrative when they explained something. Non-verbal cues were a way of confirming that the message has been absorbed by the receiver.

Conversations With a Polish Musician

The cruise ship had international crew members working in different departments. As a musician, my roommate was an orchestra member from Poland. He was a very talented guitarist, but his level of English comprehension was quite low. In fact, during the first few weeks that we were roommates, there were a lot of non-verbal gestures that transpired in our conversation. Difficult words and phrases were often replaced with gestures and other non-verbal cues. However, we both adjusted well so that it did not really take a long time to get to know each other.

We talked about many things including family relationships, music, work, and many other subjects. Surprisingly, we shared ‘inside jokes’ being roommates, that at times, we were the only ones laughing while everybody else in a party was in awe. Our conversations were conducted in English, and just like my interactions with guests, I was also sensitive with my Polish friend who had some issues with the international language. In fact, there were pauses in between chats. In my case, I paused mainly to find the right word or phrase that could be easily understood. It gave me time to carefully organize my thoughts in my head. Organizing idea means to arrange its components in a sensible and pleasing manner (White, 1986, p. 42 as cited in Miftah, 2011). Also, it was not just the choice of words that mattered, but accent, too. Polish citizens place heavy ‘r’ in their pronunciation and their written language is just as difficult as the spoken form. I tried so many times to emulate Polish pronunciation, but to this day, I am still nowhere close to speaking correctly. Individual socio-contextual settings could have a critical

impact on developing distinct attitudes toward one's own accent among EFL speakers (Shibata, 2021).

Our conversations turned into meaningful cultural encounters, associated with the use of the English language. For instance, music rehearsals became interesting encounters as we sought different meanings for certain musical terms. The phrase, 'holding back tempo,' a phrase used in interpreting music, was used to mean drinking slowly, which to him, was a way of savoring the liquor spirit. He demonstrated *rubato* (holding back tempo) with a sip of beer in a rather slow and sensual manner that I found weird at first, but, when he explained to me the rationale behind the action, I could not help myself laughing. In another instance, drinking tea was supposed to be done while letting the tea bag diffuse its flavor naturally in hot water without stirring. As an Asian person, I was accustomed to stirring hot water while the tea diffused its scent all over the cup. The essence of these examples had something to do with the role of language in explaining the situation. In other words, the English language provided the definitive answer to our cultural nuances and peculiarity, with each one of us trying to explain in the most convincing manner. We did not pay attention to grammar; we savored our conversations with natural excitement; we enjoyed our company despite language inadequacy.

My roommate was very eager to learn the English language even if he made too many mistakes because, according to him, it was the only way to learn. In one of our interactions, he mentioned that back in Poland, the English language was not important. No one in his circle spoke the language, so he took every chance to practice conversational English with me, taking every chance to correct some mistakes here and there. In my case, I had the same moment of eagerness to share what I knew about correct pronunciation, accent, and other nuances, even if I considered myself a second-language communicator, too. I reflected many times on account of my role as an active listener. Somehow, it became a responsibility to provide corrections. Beaming with excitement, he responded in a positive way so that speaking in English became our bonding moment.

Perhaps, we hit it off, linguistically speaking, because we both had similar colonial backgrounds. My Polish acquaintance and I had some language barrier issues. Concerns like language readiness, comprehension, and spontaneous articulation were difficult to manage. Given the history of foreign leadership in both countries, these problems prevented us from being labeled as "cool" English speakers. For this reason, it seemed plausible that we were

speaking in a foreign language that we had only learned via formal education, movies, and few conversations with a select few others.

I saw that he was something of an introvert while on board the cruise. He bemoaned the fact that he didn't speak much English and, as a result, didn't get to know other crew members very well when asked why. This realization had an impact on how I interacted with other crew members, indicating that I was also experiencing some uneasiness when it came to communicating in English. Understanding one another was crucial in a global context, and I tried to embody that linguistic flow.

To resolve the situation, I sought advice from my American friends to deal with our shortcomings, asking them about basic grammar, appropriate vocabulary, and correct pronunciation. I was surprised to hear that I shouldn't be concerned about them. Speaking differently was quite normal given our different cultural upbringings. Knowing this made me think about how I communicate, particularly considering my difficulties with speaking along with my Polish roommate. I carried on with my communication practice, letting actions and words work together to convey my ideas clearly and concisely without giving any thought to sentence construction whatsoever. I came to see that language was more than just syntax. What was important was sensibility and passion. For example, the way a phrase was delivered—that is, its tone, gesture, and attitude—contributed to its meaningful interpretation. These factors were all considered while interpreting communication.

Towards a Fruitful Communication Practice

In an international setting where several people speak in English as their second language, adapting communication strategies to convey messages is crucial. To convey messages and to remain in a conversation until the communication goal is achieved, ESL (English as a Second Language) learners need to employ communication strategies, defined generally as devices used by second language learners to overcome perceived barriers to achieving specific communication goals (Færch & Kasper, 1983 as cited in Putri, 2013). For instance, there is a lot of listening to verbal and non-verbal cues as meanings can take on different levels, and there will be behavioral surprises that can turn into bonding moments. Perhaps, this is to compensate for the language inadequacy in both senders and receivers of information such as an act of 'understanding,' substituting verbal explanation to bursting laughter, essentially contextualize

communication practice. Pragmatic communication is the use of a set of sociolinguistic rules related to language within a communicative context; that is, pragmatics is the way language is used to communicate rather than the way language is structured (Ciccia, 2011). In many ways, communicating a foreign language becomes part of the commonplace practice, situating individuals within social dimensions that play significant roles in their lived experience.

Next, second language speaking among European individuals who also share the same sentiment with other second-language speakers from another continent learn from each other, constantly re-assuring themselves that even if they speak an international language, the fact that they indulge on it is more than enough. Language is an important part of how people interact with each other because it is the most basic way to share ideas and information (Ahtif & Gandhi, 2022). It reflects culture, so when people from more than one culture live together, how they use language is more important and complicated (Ahtif & Gandhi, 2022). This shared sentiment manifests in group dynamics where a general fondness is instilled among communicators. The more similar knowledge or experience, the greater the likelihood of similarity of meaning is also greater to create (Nuryana et al., 2017).

Next, pride in speaking a global tongue takes its course, exhibiting inquisitive behavior, manifesting eagerness and nurturing engagement among communicating individuals. On many occasions, second-language speakers declare such pride and dignity when they are not around with native English speakers as their level of confidence to communicate is generally higher. Moreover, since they are not born with this type of knowledge, and since they develop it through experience and education in L1 (first language), it should not surprise anyone that when learning a foreign language also takes time to learn what is polite, for instance, and what is not and that it may take time for learners to create another set of rules of appropriate pragmatic behavior (Klimczak-Pawlak, 2019).

Following the foregoing explanations, second-language communication in Europe, based on my personal journey aboard a luxury liner, is a manifestation of cross-cultural communication as a pervasive form of worldwide communication, connecting instantly and constantly, and yet we all too often fail to understand each other (Adler & Aycan, 2018). The statement attests that those different cultural backgrounds in Europe fuel divisiveness in character, which essentially affects language development. Inside a cruise ship, multilingualism pervades, providing different contexts that are in some level forced to manifest international understanding to carry out the

duties of crew members. Although they undergo training in English communication back in their home countries, they still carry with them their native sensibilities. Faced with international crew members who are largely European, Euro-English, a distinct European variety consisting of the most frequent English language features throughout Europe (Mohr et al., 2019), can develop, where Europeans tend to grasp its nuances through communication practice with other nationalities, such utterances affected by distinct pronunciation, vocabulary, and general rules of grammar adapted to suit their context.

Finally, while it is incumbent upon international crew members to speak the English language to communicate effectively with international guests and crew, there is longingness to foster intercultural communication through understanding other second languages apart from English in a multicultural setting. Command of languages other than English should be promoted as an undeniable asset and a medium for more in-depth communication based on understanding and relationship building (Kozak et al., 2022). The global popularity of English certainly facilitates intercultural encounters but, contrary to popular belief, communicative competence in *lingua franca* English does not ensure satisfying conversational control and is not enough to successfully function abroad (Kozak et al., 2022). In effect, English language cannot be imposed in a culturally and linguistically diverse setting such as in a cruise ship. Furthermore, second language acquisition in Europe manifests in the educational setting. Today, bilingual education (BE) in dominant languages is available in most European public education systems (Helot & Cavalli, 2017). In this regard, international crew members who work in Europe may avail themselves of the opportunity, especially when ships dock in Europe for a period. In today's proliferation of digitalization process, online learning is suitable in the face of flexible working conditions aboard the ship. What students learn can be applied directly and instantly to guests and crew members.

Conclusion

My personal stories aboard a luxury liner that travelled around European ports of call illuminated cross-cultural communication practices that signified international mindedness. For one, the issue of English language inadequacy was never a daunting experience because I always found joy in engaging conversations with tourists and fellow crew members. It was a dynamic learning experience to listen to each other's speech defects such as incorrect pronunciations,

heavy accented words and phrases, among others, because many of the crew members came from non-English nations. Second, I realized that interpersonal communication went beyond rules and procedures in English language use, rather, it was my emotional attachment to people that created deep meanings through intercultural exchange. Third, speaking in English as a second language in a multi-cultural setting provided wonderful opportunities to effectively communicate while incorporating hand gestures and other non-verbal cues to substantiate any language inadequacy. Lastly, language communication proved to be an effective tool in fostering good relationships for international workers who had to be away from home for several months.

Notes on the Contributor

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