A Facebook-based Debate Through English as a *Lingua Franca*: A Move Toward Intercultural Awareness for a World of Differences

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Abstract: Against the increasingly internationalized nature of higher education across the world using English as a *lingua franca* (ELF), the research reported by this paper is focused around an eight-week Facebook-based debate course to assist university learners of English in Iraq and their international counterparts in the US to negotiate and share social practices and other meanings through intercultural communications using ELF. Baker’s (2011) model of intercultural awareness is presented as the model underpinning its aims. Through thematic analysis, the results reveal participants’ ICA development, conceptual change, and representation of both in their intercultural communication as a social practice. Clearly, native-like proficiency in English is not at stake. The results show how dynamically emerging and situated the relationship is between ELF and users' cultures are for self and other (re-)presentation, a point that needs to be given considerable attention in higher-education contexts.

Keywords: Facebook debates, intercultural awareness, English as a *lingua franca* (ELF), qualitative research.

1. Introduction

The increasingly international nature of higher education means that intercultural issues are of greater importance than ever. Accompanying this increase in intercultural connections in higher education has been a rise in the use of English to facilitate communication between students of different lingual-cultural backgrounds. English as a *lingua franca* (ELF henceforth) is used for intercultural communication. As per Baker (2011: 200), intercultural communication in this context is defined as a "sociocultural process" requiring users of English to recognize and respond flexibly to the complex, emergent relationship between English language, culture, and communication. The intercultural dimension is often cited as one of the major drivers of internationalization of higher education. The need to develop it has been acknowledged in theory and practice (Knight 2006, Ryan 2011, Killick 2013). Students in international higher-education programs are often expected to develop their intercultural awareness and cultivate an identity as intercultural citizens. This involves recognizing the global scale of social relations, respecting and valuing diversity, and participating in communities at multiple levels from local to global (Killick 2013). However, there is insufficient evidence concerning the extent to which experiences of internationalization lead to development of intercultural awareness. The intercultural dimension of higher education is typically not incorporated in a systematic or in-depth manner in higher-education policy or practice (Baker 2016). How linguistic issues relate to intercultural development is far from clear. Given the key role of language, especially English, in intercultural communication and the internationalization of universities, this issue needs to be given greater prominence.

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It is crucial that Iraqi higher-education institutions are able to engage with international education networks and this research endeavors to do so. Given Iraq’s history of geopolitical tensions and conflict, intercultural issues are of particular relevance. This study aims to develop Iraqi university students’ intercultural awareness by engaging them in an online intercultural debate course through ELF with students at an international US university. The US has been at the forefront of the internationalization of education, with its increasingly multilingual and multicultural student populations. The theoretical basis for this research is Baker’s (2011) model of intercultural awareness (see also Baker 2015, Kusumaningputri & Widodo 2018, Yu & Meale 2018), but more research is needed.

The study is built around an eight-week Facebook-based debate course to help university students from Iraq and the US successfully negotiate and share thoughts through ELF-based intercultural communication. The Iraqi students should be enabled to understand how cultural norms and frames of reference can be flexibly conceptualized in intercultural communication as a way to celebrate differences in the world. A qualitative approach sits well in this context in virtue of both the exploratory nature of this research and its focus on participants’ own interpretations of their experiences. The data primarily comes through analysis of transcriptions of Facebook debates/comments (text and video). Analysis involves a mixture of top-down coding based on the research aims and ICA model with emergent bottom-up codes derived from the data (Miles et al. 2014).

1.1 Theoretical considerations

Adopting a particular culture to represent a group of Anglophone speakers as a model for English-language teaching has become hard to sustain. As per Baker (2009), I would argue that equipping English-language learners with the language’s more general structural features is no assurance of their success in intercultural communication. Intercultural communication requires users of English to recognize and respond flexibly. ELF teachers should not consider culture a solidified object with clear socio-geographic reference to its speakers (Canagarajah 2007, Pennycook 2007). Instead, a post-cultural, post-normative approach is required (Kumaravadivelu 2006, Dewey 2012). Wolf (2014: 449) argues that:

Given the multilingual and multicultural reality of most countries in the world, it would indeed be fallacious to equate a nation with a particular culture. Yet it would be equally fallacious to equate a language with a culture, as cultures, or, perhaps less reifying, cultural conceptualizations may be shared across different languages and groups of speakers….

Students need to be aware of the diverse nature of our postmodern world, a world that blurs and expands the fixed boundaries of the social and linguistic categories represented in an essentialist modernist paradigm (Pennycook 2010). Intercultural communication cannot be restricted to language proficiency but extends to include interlocutors’ knowledge, attitudes, behavior and impact on their communication as social practice (Wolf 2014, Baker 2009). As in Bhabha’s (1994: 55) “hybridity”, there must be space for the enouncement of cultural differences where culture-related meanings and signs “can be appropriated, translated, re-historicized, and read anew”.

Baker (2011: 202) argues that ICA is what speakers need in heterogeneous communities to negotiate and share meanings and social practices successfully; ICA is “a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real time communication”. Baker’s approach is broad enough to include individuals’ knowledge, skills and behavior to avoid needing to make any distinction between competence and performance (Baker 2015). It is more than the cognitive
aspect of intercultural communication (Chen & Starosta 1999), more than a mere part of individuals’ knowledge, comprehension and self-other recognition (Fantini 2000, Deardorff 2006, Korzilius et al. 2007).

As per Yu and Maele (2018), I find Baker’s (2011) ICA model a suitable holistic framework to understand participants’ attitudes and behavior in relation to their intercultural communication. Baker’s model consists of three interacting levels: basic cultural, advanced cultural and intercultural awareness. Baker classifies ICA into two parts: conceptual ICA and practice-oriented ICA. While the former is fundamentally concerned with the individual’s attitudes in relation to culture and culture-related knowledge for effective engagement in intercultural communication, the latter is more related to ICA-based practice with its focus on individuals’ skills and behavior for applying that knowledge in intercultural communication. For Baker, the distinction among ICA’s levels and components is transparent and non-linear. It is an interactive, reciprocal relationship where any development in individuals’ attitudes or knowledge as part of conceptual ICA will somehow be reflected in their capacities for ICA-oriented practice.

1.2 A Facebook-based debate

With the changing nature of students’ educational profiles, cultural views, backgrounds, experience and knowledge (Wilkinson 1999), higher-education institutions need to try just-in-time educational adaptations (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read 2002: 8). Laurillard (2012) highlights the key role technology has in aiding teaching and learning in these settings.

Although considerable attention has been paid to the use of the Internet to improve language learners’ intercultural competence (Belz & Thorne 2006, Belz 2003) and Baker’s (2012) use of e-learning to address relationships between language (variations in global English), culture and intercultural communication, the present research argues that there is more value to be gained in manipulating Facebook as a platform for debate. Baker (2012: 5) writes that this can be considered “one possible means of bringing a greater cultural dimension into the classroom in a manner that reflects the complexity of English use in global contexts”. The goal is to have language learners more engaged in intercultural dialogue for self-other understanding with the realization of that in their ELF practice (Wolf 2014). This significantly promotes participants’ socio-pragmatic competence where Facebook provides with a comfort zone for in-group inclusion as members of a community. It functions to avoid the appearance of ethnocentrism. It shapes participants’ online cultural identity and online ethnic identity: all part of how culture and communication work to affect each other (Leeming & Danino 2012).

1.3 Debating self and other

In education, debate is defined as a social practice that helps students work on finding out certain evidence for what they are with or against as part of their high-order thinking skills (Oros 2007). Having students involved in debate-based activities enables them to define the problem, reasonably assess available sources, identify challenges, inconsistent points of what is being debated about or argued on, which all at the end fall within the scope of their own criticality (Kennedy 2007). Going beyond ‘yes/no’ answers, they are in ideal scenarios more required to say why they agree or disagree on a point of debate (Zare & Othman 2013 and Jackson 2009).

Debate is not the subject of the present research. It is manipulated as a means for participating students to put their knowledge and attitudes about topics at hand in practice with ELF. This requires neither the researcher nor participants to have complete knowledge about any participants’ cultures (Baker 2015, Wolf 2014). Students need not have their bags
packed, so to speak, to achieve international understanding of those they debate. The goal is to assist individuals to move from a process of enculturation to one of acculturation (Damen 1987: 140).

The research questions are

1. What are participants’ views of the Facebook-based debate course they attended?
2. What are participants’ perceptions of ELF in relation to the course?

2. Research methodology

The data is composed of two recorded semi-structured group interviews coordinated with participants’ video conferences, Facebook comments, posts, reflection reports and emails. This reveals participants’ conceptual ICA and the representation of that in their practice-oriented ICA, as part of real-time intercultural communication (Baker 2015).

With a collaborator at Seattle and Antioch universities in the US, I recruited 40 students to attend the course, titled Iraq/US Great Debates Course 2018, East and West. See Table 1 for participants’ code names.

**Table 1:** Participants’ code names.

| US participants | Gender | Iraqi participants | Gender |
|-----------------|--------|--------------------|--------|
| AmrCN           | M      | IrWN               | F      |
| AmrDO           | M      | IrHH               | F      |
| AmrJC           | M      | IrFA               | F      |
| AmrTQ           | M      | IrAK               | F      |
| AmrJJ           | M      | IrHS               | F      |
| AmrAK           | M      | IrDA               | F      |
| AmrJS           | M      | IrZK               | F      |
| AmrCH           | M      | IrST               | F      |
| AmrSK           | M      | IrAJ               | F      |
| AmrCT           | M      | IrHM               | M      |
| AmrJG           | M      | IrFS               | M      |
| AmrMD           | M      | IrAA               | M      |
| AmrAA           | M      |                    |        |
| AmrTC           | M      |                    |        |
| AmrNG           | M      |                    |        |
| AmrCC           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrAKU          | F      |                    |        |
| AmrFA           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrKM           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrKB           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrMV           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrSH           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrJW           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrXK           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrSM           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrMA           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrTS           | F      |                    |        |
| AmrSS           | F      |                    |        |
The Iraqi participants were twelve fourth-year undergraduates in the department of English at an Iraqi university, 22-24 years old. English as a foreign language formed almost 12 years of their education to date. Selection criteria were based on their English language proficiency and will to join in intercultural communications. The US participants were 28 students, mostly aged 18-20. Eight were white; four were Arab or Middle Eastern; five were Spanish; five were South Asian; two were African American; two were African; and two were Chinese. Ethical procedures were followed and permissions obtained; see Appendix B.

I conducted two recorded semi-structured group interviews with the Iraqi participants: before and after the course. The first (about 57 minutes) was in a study room in their department. The second (almost 84 minutes) was in my office. The interviews were in Arabic and English, the better for students to express what they had in mind. The first informed participants about the research aim; their role; the right to withdraw at any point; and the way their data would be recorded, transcribed and protected. They were offered time to ask about anything, presented with a short questionnaire about their interests and reasons for majoring in English, and given consent forms to sign. The same procedure was followed by my colleague with the participants from the US university. All participants were invited to be members of the closed Facebook group *Iraq/US Great Debates Course 2018, East and West*. Both my colleague and I monitored activity in the group.

The second interview covered participants’ reflections on the course: linguistic and cultural challenges (if any) they experienced and how they managed to overcome their challenges, along with how much they valued the course and to what extent ELF was important to the course. As a moderator, I understood how important it was to suppress my own personal views, to collect an informative dataset (Morgan 1996). My colleague asked his students to submit reflection papers about the course.

Analysis involved a mixture of top-down coding based on the research aims and ICA model with bottom-up codes derived from the data. The incorporation of both the researcher’s analysis of the Facebook exchanges and participants’ own interpretations paved the way for emic and etic perspectives. Through triangulation of data sources, a rich picture of participants’ intercultural experiences was built up (Miles et al. 2014, Schreier 2012). To ensure reliability, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) trustworthiness criteria were followed: the study codebook was shared with an expert for assessing inter-rater reliability.

3. The debate course

The course lasted eight weeks. As an unassessed complement to other course modules, participants were expected to engage actively in debate as “training in intercultural awareness [that] can make the unknown seem a little less surprising” (Fries 2009: 11).

Both researchers did their best to create balanced groups in terms of shared interests, language competence and level of education (Hadavi 2004). Participants were divided into global teams of four participants each (two pro + two con, with mixed representation from Iraqis and Americans on both sides) to debate. Up to three additional American students joined as resource researchers or moderator; see Appendix A.

Students were required to choose the topics (two for each team) and organize into teams on the first day of class. They were asked to engage via asynchronous video recordings and synchronous video conferences throughout the course. Each team did two live debates, the first performed outside of class hours due to the time-zone difference. One topic from each group was selected to be studied for one week by the class as a whole, with the team that selected that issue leading discussion. All debates were recorded and posted in the closed Facebook group. On the final day of the course, each class produced a closing video of thanks and debriefing. A certificate of completion was issued to all students, certifying that the
student successfully completed the course, containing both university logos and signed by the professor.

It was important that students choose controversial topics related to sociopolitical practices, customs and lifestyles of the target cultures (Lázár et al. 2007). To avoid “dualism” (Tumposky 2004), participants were encouraged to argue among themselves. They were not expected to give one hundred percent agreement at any point. This was to avoid “the danger of culture being limited to the all-too-familiar stereotypical icons of the target culture [and] of believing that there is one authoritative account of another country and its cultures” (Byram et al. 2002: 11).

Participants were clearly informed about their roles in advance. Iraqi participants only were further required to first post their topics for debate on a separate closed Facebook group for the researcher to give his own feedback before being posted to their teams for the debate, as a kind of “preliminary debate” (Hadavi 2004).

4. Results
As a result of data analysis, I identified four themes: self-other representation, ICA as multiple voices, feedback on the course, and ELF-related remarks.

4.1 Self-other representation
Especially in the initial phases, self (re-)presentation via video conference enabled participants to familiarize themselves with each other’s hobbies, life experience, preferred cuisine, dress and social practices. See Figure 1 for a snippet of dialogue accompanying one such video conference.

![Figure 1: A snippet of video-conference dialogue (Theme I).](image-url)
IrHH and IrST introduce Iraqi culture as an endless and unsolidified entity. Their contribution served to break any sense of difference and build a bond of deference or even sameness.

**AmrCN:** I was surprised to hear these facts, especially the fact that Iraq is made up of many diverse cultures, since it made me realize that Iraq might not be much different than America after all.

Self-presentation in relation to the other proved an important step toward practicing intercultural debate through ELF. This helped them negotiate their first cultural frame of reference. My US colleague put it like this:

Without this [cultural artefact introductions], students don't get the fullest picture of the intercultural context for one another and thus it takes away from their ability to use English effectively. They would not create cohesive groups that could then solve their assigned tasks effectively and with depth.

### 4.2 ICA as multiple voices

The course served as a platform for participants to learn through working together to address issues of global concern. Through live video conferencing, student-produced videos, and synchronous and asynchronous messaging, students became more inclined to have their multiple voices heard, ending up with a better understanding of one another’s cultural views.

Participants’ feelings were so clear debating poverty with reference to education and how governmental bodies were, in their view, responsible. Figures 2 and 3 show comments from two students. Group 4 came to the conclusion that poverty was the primary cause for terrorism.

**Figure 2:** Group 4 student linking terrorism to poverty.
Figure 3: Students discussing poverty's connection to terrorism (snippet 1).
Figure 4: Debating poverty (snippet 2).
A turning point came in the debate over political corruption where all felt alienated from their respective governments, forging a sense of solidarity.

**Figure 5:** Debating poverty (snippet 3).

A turning point came in the debate over political corruption where all felt alienated from their respective governments, forging a sense of solidarity.
My current event this week is a video regarding the upcoming parliamentary elections in Iraq. This video discusses various prominent issues, with a specific focus on the corruption in politics over the last decade and a half. This is an important topic to cover because the elections are this Saturday (the 12th) and will impact the lives of every Iraqi citizen for years to come. Eliminating corruption and electing honest and proactive politicians will be extremely beneficial for the Country as a whole.

Figure 6: Debating political corruption (snippet 1).
Figure 7: Debating political corruption (snippet 2).
Students had a similar coming together in considering terrorism as part of an extremist ideology, not of Islam (figures 6–8). Some participants ended up changing their minds. In both cases (figures 4–5, 6–8), participants reflected conceptual change from a starting point of defining self at the national level to one of doing so at the global level (Wolf 2014). This was clear from one Iraqi student’s comment that “it was so important for me to let the world know that we all share the same place and threat of ISIS” (my translation from the Arabic). On Facebook, AmrTC commented that “Islam is not the same as terrorism, cannot put it all to Islam…”.
I choose this article as my current event because it discusses the school systems in Iraq w/ and w/o ISIS. I think this is a good article because it talks about how ISIS uses students as fighters instead of letting them continue on with their education. "A math textbook, for example, asked students in one exercise to calculate the number of "unbelievers" who could be killed by a car bomber. Another referenced how many explosives a factory could produce. All plus signs were removed because they resemble the Christian cross." I think this quote was very powerful because since ISIS claims to be a "religious" group (which they aren't AT ALL) try take over students learning by feeding into their minds that they must learn about explosives and killing people instead of real subjects they need to learn about like math and science. I think this article will support the Con side of our debate topic which is is the best education system one that favors the smartest among us? because some people don't have the power of further continuing their education because of terrorist groups like these who don't allow them to learn what they should be learning.

Figure 9: Debating terrorism in Iraq (snippet 1).
Figure 10: Debating terrorism in Iraq (snippet 2).
Thank you for sharing this post with me. I too, specifically liked the quote you picked out from the article, and would like to add that right after your quote it states, “Parents were quite afraid of sending their kids to the (ISIS) schools,” Ibarra Sanchez said. “Sometimes they were forced to.” After reading your quote and adding this one in, I feel like I now know how ISIS recruits young kids, and that is by brainwashing them. I was honestly surprised to read these quotes presented, since I had assumed ISIS terrorists did their acts out of sacrifice for their religion. But after reading this article, it is clear many of these terrorist are brainwashed. For this reason, “Do you think it would be fair to give young ISIS terrorists, who have survived bombings or terrorist acts, a second chance at straightening up their life?” Since at the end of the day, they may have been brainwashed into doing the acts they did, and since they might have been forced to go to a school where ISIS manipulated the topics and the things they learned.

When ISIS came to Iraq change every thing into black side this good article to discuss this important subject i wanna to add something ISIS also established or printed new books related with their religion and learning student how to make explosives how to be good kamikaze also use guns through the education. But each things finish when Iraqi army achieved victory against ISIS and now every thing is normal😊

Hi, are you saying that now student aren’t taken over by ISIS?
Iraqi participants divided on the question of Muqtada al-Sadr as a representative figure of (their) Shiite society.

**IrFS:** We need no more debates about religion… we [are] fed up.

**IrHS:** Debating topics related to religion and its figures like that of Muqtada al-Sadr is like [an] area which takes us nowhere.

**IrHM:** Religious figures [like Muqtada] are undebatable names…. They are part of who you are.
They were further divided in debating the Gulf coalition against Yemen in relation to what they saw as a Saudi-Iran proxy war, with its effect on Iraq (figures 13-17).

Figure 13: Debating religion and politics (snippet 1).
Figure 14: Debating religion and politics (snippet 2).

Figure 15: Debating religion and politics (snippet 3).
Figure 16: Debating religion and politics (snippet 4).
Figure 17: Debating religion and politics (snippet 5).

As per Baker (2011), this discussion illustrates how a point of disagreement in intercultural communication can serve to reveal participants’ core beliefs. IrHM’s reference to “yellow snakes” is as a symbol that potentially stands for the coalition forces gathered against Iraq in 2003 or the Gulf coalition led by Saudi Arabia against Yemen.

4.3 Feedback on the course
Participants shared their positive experiences getting to know more about and accept others’ viewpoints as part of intercultural communication.

AmrAA [feedback post, 25 April 2018]: One of the most important skills I learned in this class is being able to be open minded to other people even if you disagree with what they say. Prior to this class, I would be enraged if I hear someone say something that I thought was wrong or against my values, but know [sic] I understand not everyone grew up the same so different experiences affect people differently and lead to different views.

AmrJW [feedback post, 25 April 2018]: I never thought I would have this contact with someone in another country. It was really cool being able to learn about their culture and compare it to here in the US.

AmrAA [feedback post, 25 April 2018]: P. something new I learned during this debate is not to trust everything you’ve heard and never experienced yourself. I. when one of
my counterparts from Iraq explained that he also agrees that nuclearization is helpful he talked about if Iraq had nuclear weapons it never would have gotten invaded and wouldn’t be where its [sic] at right now. E. listening to all the news from the west they acted like all of Iraqs [sic] citizens supported the invasion and the occupation of Iraq. But after my debate I learned that Iraqs [sic] people didn’t support the invasion of their country and disrupted and hurt their country more than it helped.

Such evaluative stances explain how intercultural debates help shape the interactive relationship between individuals’ conceptual level and practice. This extends to understanding others’ different views toward religion, as in IrWN’s interview comment:

**IrWN:** This course was an opportunity to think of even my Sunni relatives, I am Shiite, before this I used to keep myself in the room when they visit us… now I regret this very much…. I am now happy with anyone… we are all human beings.

In the interviews, the Iraqi participants expressed their experience of the course as a welcome addition to their classroom-based language learning, learning to question critically issues representing the core of their daily lives.

**IrAK:** I can now see how it would be possible to live sharing our different perspectives about religion, politics, marriage… but still there is something personal everyone should respect.

### 4.4 ELF-related remarks

In their pre-course interview, the Iraqi participants expressed consensus regarding English as “the only and best means” for them to learn more about the world. The importance of English for communication with neighboring countries like Turkey and Iran – to some extent with Kurds in the north of Iraq – and, most importantly, as the only language chosen to work in parallel with Arabic at all levels of education were all motivations identified. To become a teacher of English and the expected status attributed to that in Iraq was a further important factor. Practicing their English with native speakers and knowing more about the US were the main reasons for participation in the course. Descriptions like “ideal”, “correct”, “pure”, “RP” [received pronunciation] and “standard” English all emerged in the interview, attributable to their teaching materials: e.g., O’Connor (1980), Stageberg (1965) and Quirk et al. (2008).

In the post-course interview, the Iraqi participants’ views were more geared toward ELF than Anglophone norms:

**IrDA [Facebook comment, 25 April 2018]:** I was afraid of videoing myself or writing mmm… no but mainly because I think my English is not good but I felt they [the Americans] can understand me in debate…. I was encouraged to do I feel sometimes cannot understand them.

The American participants expressed similar feelings and concerns about working with the Iraqi students for whom English was not their mother tongue.

**AmrJW [Facebook comment, 25 April 2018]:** At first, I was very nervous to start this because I did not know how it was going to be like having to communicate and work with people who do not have English as their primary language, but it was not a problem. There were some confusions as we would talk, but it really was not a lot and easily resolved.

**AmrTC [Facebook comment, 25 April 2018]:** Besides for being challenged with technical difficulties, there were some troubles with communication, as English is IrAK
and Ir FA’s second language on the Iraqi side. However, this problem of communication I feel strengthened our relationship as a team, since it forced us to talk more back and forth. Not only that, but it forced me to learn the importance of body language.

My US collaborator wrote an email summarizing this experience:

I was particularly pleased with how our students worked to understand group dynamics as well, so as to get their global group to function at a higher level… and many commented on their improved skills in better understanding group dynamics in a problem-solving global team by the end of the class.

Overall, I was very pleased with how the Great Debates format helped students in both countries to go beyond just using the English language better in a debate format, but in understanding issues and how they might play out in different cultures, and to then find supporting evidence to be persuasive. Clearly, for nearly all of the students in both classes, I felt their cross-cultural communication skills were significantly enhanced by this experience in just 8 weeks of work together.

5. Discussion

The course helped participants move from a traditional view of “my culture” vs. “their culture” by using the tools of ELF. Baker’s (2011) ICA model with its three levels served as framework for understanding participants’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes. As in Baker’s model, participants moved from a basic understanding just of their own culture to a ‘self and other’ understanding appropriate to intercultural communication. This was clearly represented in how Group 3 addressed their first topic, country culture: what is a superior culture (see Appendix A).

The ICA-oriented tasks used in this study enabled participants to develop trust within their groups and bond based on their self-other understanding, allowing them to work together effectively to come up with strong debates and complete their assignments. They felt accountable to one another and were motivated to come through for each other.

In answering the first research question (“what are participants’ views of the Facebook-based debate course they attended?”), one finds clear indication that the course helped students deepened their discourses, comment critically on a range of ICA-oriented topics, and so recognize how “multiple voices or perspectives within any cultural grouping” echo “the relative nature of cultural norms” and the way that cultural understanding is “provisional and open to revision” (Baker 2012: 66). The course demonstrates how relatively easy and informative it is to engage students in intercultural communication via ELF. Facebook has served as an ideal platform for participants to scaffold their critical stance and linguacultural knowledge through learning from and knowing about each other. The positive feedback from participants during and after the course confirms this.

The course demonstrated that being an effective communicator in English is more valuable than having native fluency. An effective communicator is one who understands intercultural communication “in a manner that goes both beyond the national and fixed ‘target’ community [and recognizes] the pluralism of communicative practices associated with ELF” (Baker 2011: 211). Through ELF, participants conformed to the norms of no particular community but their own, created for the course.

The answer to the second research question (“what are participants’ perceptions of ELF in relation to the course?”) is that ELF has been recognized as a productive tool to respond to group dynamics within a community of practice. At the onset, it was foreign to all the participants from both countries. Participants not just expected but experienced intelligibility-
related issues; but, nevertheless, they learned to work together, accommodating each other's English.

6. Conclusion

This work contributes to the field of intercultural communication and ELF via its account of a Facebook-based university course. It paves the way for teachers to include the (inter)cultural dimension as an inevitable part of their instructional practice in English-language teaching. In the present study, Iraqi students learned to move away from their comfort zone of dominant discourse regarding (say) Arab language, history and culture, into acknowledging their fellow participants' valuable contributions and different perspectives: a point that is surely applicable in many other contexts.

By the end of the eight-week course, students demonstrated an obvious shift in views from basic to advanced cultural awareness. Almost all participants managed to put their understanding of cultural differences aside and embrace the fluid nature of culture and cultural exchange.

Generalizable results were not the aim in this research, which was limited in terms of number of participants, context and time available for the (unassessed) course. In the end, it is hard to be certain of the extent to which participants developed their intercultural awareness via ELF. That said, the results do sit well with those of other studies in the area (e.g., Yu & Maele 2018, Kusumaningputri & Widodo 2018).

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Appendix A: Groups and topics

Group 1
Iraq: IrAK, IrFA
US: AmrTS, AmrSS, AmrMA, AmrKM, AmrAKU

Topics
1. World economics: do the wealthiest countries conspire to harm the weaker economies? **Resolved:** that the world economy is a conspiracy, largely led by the US and European forces, designed to weaken developing countries like Iraq.
2. Country culture: how best is household finance managed? **Resolved:** if you live with your parents, the control of finances should rest with the elder father of the household.

Group 2
Iraq: IrHS, IrDA
US: IrST, AmrJJ, AmrTQ, AmrTC, AmrFA

Topics
1. Immigration: are highly restrictive immigration policies beneficial to the world? **Resolved:** that the US should tightly restrict immigration policies, particularly from Muslim-dominant countries, to enhance security.
2. Animal rights: should animals be more protected from human consumption? **Resolved:** due to the threat posed to our planet, meat consumption should be dramatically reduced worldwide.

Group 3
Iraq: IrHM, IrAJ
US: AmrCN, AmrSM, AmrJG, AmrSK, AmrCH

Topics
1. Country culture: what is a superior culture? **Resolved:** that the Iraqi economic, political and cultural system is, on balance, superior to the US.
2. Free education: is the best educational system the one that favors the smartest among us? **Resolved:** that all universities in the US and Iraq should provide free university education, but only to those students scoring in the top 40% on entrance exams – to ensure the highest quality education, regardless of diversity goals.

Group 4
Iraq: IrHH, IrWN
US: AmrNG, AmrMV, AmrCT, AmrDO, AmrTC

Topics
1. Poverty and terrorism: what is the primary cause of terrorism? **Resolved:** poverty is the primary cause of terrorism.
2. Religion and freedom of expression: how is religious criticism best handled in developing democratic societies? **Resolved:** that criticism of religious practices is part of the freedom of expression.
Group 5

Iraq: IrZK, IrST
US: AmrJW, AmrXK, AmrSH, AmrCC

Topics
1. Democracy: is sometimes less of it more? **Resolved:** that nations must sometimes choose to act less democratically in order ultimately to become more democratic.
2. School uniforms: what is the overall impact of school uniforms on learning? **Resolved:** that mandatory school uniforms promote equality and diminish the importance of economic difference among students and should be promoted as good school policy.

Group 6

Iraq: IrAA, IrFS
US: AmrMD, AmrJS, AmrKB, AmrAK, AmrAA

Topics
1. Possession of nuclear weapons: who should own nuclear weapons to ensure the best world order? **Resolved:** that all countries should have the right to possess nuclear weapons just as the five veto countries do.
2. Institution of marriage: compare perspective between Iraq and the United States. **Resolved:** we ensure stronger family bonds and better results when the parents determine who their daughters are allowed to marry.
Appendix B: Consent form

College of Education
Department of English

Consent Form

Study Title: A Facebook-based debate through English as a Lingua Franca (ELF): A move toward intercultural awareness for a world of differences

Researcher Name:

Please initial the boxes if you agree with the statement(s):

I have read and understood the information concerning this study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I agree to take part in this research project and agree my data to be used for the purpose of this study.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study without consequence at any time simply by informing the researcher of my decision.

Data Protection

I understand that my information collected about during my participation in this study will be stored on a password-protected computer and that this information will only be used for the purpose of the study. All files containing any personal data will be made anonymous.

Name of the participant

Signature

Date: 20 12 2018