

BEYOND WORDS: EXPLORING LANGUAGE EXCHANGE AND CULTURAL CONNECTION AT SPEAK DATING 2024 IN ZHUTIAN

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ABSTRACT

Today, as the world becomes more connected, language exchange plays an important role in helping people from different cultures understand each other and build meaningful relationships. This study looked at Speak Dating 2024, an event held in Zhutian, Taiwan, and organized by Polyglot.tw and the Taimei Foundation. The event encouraged real-life use of multiple languages, supported translanguaging and promoted cultural interaction among more than 30 table leaders from various language backgrounds. A qualitative case study approach was used, with the researcher participating both as an observer and as one of the language table leaders. Data collection involved participant observation, combining field notes, direct interactions, and analysis of event materials while the researcher also served as a table leader. Language learning and cultural connection were supported through the inclusive and relaxed environment. Participants conducted multilingual interaction, overcame linguistic challenges with creativity as well as respect for each other's language, established cross-cultural relationships through common narration, laughter, as well as non-verbal cues. Multilingual table leaders in attendance, food-themed interactions, as well as unplanned cultural performances contributed towards enhanced experience as well as cultural consciousness. However, limitations such as interaction duration per activity, environmental noise, as well as periodic language anxiety were established as well. The research concludes that non-formal language exchange activities such as Speak Dating can be instrumental in supporting global citizenship based on linguistic curiosity, cultural humility, as well as interpersonal connection. Inferences made have pedagogical applications for language instructors as well as event facilitators designing inclusive, participatory environments for language learning as well as intercultural interaction.

Keywords: language exchange, translanguaging, intercultural interaction, global citizenship

INTRODUCTION

In a world of globalization, language plays a significant channel for developing intercultural understanding and effective communication across communities. Communication across languages and cultures not only enriches relationships but also consolidates global cooperation in education, business, and international relations. Language exchange events are particularly significant in closing language and cultural gaps, providing one with an enriching experience of engaging in vibrant, multilingual dialogue while being surrounded by varied perspectives based on culture. Language exchange events urge one to go beyond their native languages, engage with people with varied cultures, and appreciate linguistic and cultural diversity. Language is not only a means of communication but a system of symbols

that represent cultural identity, as Kramsch (1998) rightly pointed out. Besides that, either through in-class or out-of-class interactions in these events, findings have revealed increased empathy, cultural awareness or intelligence, and flexibility among participants (Byram 1997; Fantini 2009).

These events promote education for a vision of inclusivity and global citizenship (UNESCO 2013; Dearsdorff 2006). Among all these projects, Zhutian's Speak Dating 2024 is a prime example that unites language lovers in Taiwan, providing a platform for both language learning and cultural interaction. It is a one-of-a-kind opportunity that gives a relaxed yet productive environment where attendees get a chance to practice some languages in actual conversation as well as meaningful cultural exchanges. It is a melting pot of cultures, values, and expressions and thus a valuable experience for all. Speak Dating 2024 was an initiative by the Taimei Foundation and the long-established language and culture exchange organization, Polyglot.tw. With over 30 representatives across various languages and cultures, the program provided a special international environment for interaction and exchange. Studies have demonstrated that informal areas such as these are more likely than formal classroom teaching to promote real intercultural interactions and second-language acquisition (Duff 2007; Norton and Toohey 2011).

Members that participated represented various parts of Taiwan and gathered together at Zhutian, Pingtung, and exchanged languages and cultures, providing a lively, multilingual environment for systematic and random interaction. In opposition to the systematized environment for language learning, Speak Dating 2024 provided a free, enjoyable, and relaxed setting for members to naturally pick up languages rather than the conventional classroom. Not just did the relaxed atmosphere allow language acquisition but it fostered cross-cultural relationships as well as international perspectives. It attempts to investigate the degree to which Speak Dating 2024 facilitated intercultural and language exchanges between the participants and the way in which the language contributed to intercultural connections. Studies in sociocultural theory suggest that such interactive, peer-driven settings provide rich zones of proximal development, enabling learners to stretch their linguistic and intercultural capacities (Vygotsky 1978; Lantolf and Thorne 2006; Kinginger 2008).

As a table host and attendee, the researcher takes a participant-observation stance in analyzing the language exchange dynamics, the intercultural communicational behavior, and the individual relationships built as a result. This research design enables first-hand observation of the event environment, the level of participation by the attendees, and the efficacy in language exchange practice. By examining what occurs at the participant level, the present study tries to demonstrate how Speak Dating 2024 enabled meaningful exchanges and how these exchanges translate into societal effects. Not only will the study explore the benefits but the potential challenges faced in a multicultural and multilingual setting as well, providing a well-rounded view on the effectiveness of such a program. This method of inquiry

is grounded in qualitative traditions that emphasize the richness of lived experiences in sociolinguistic settings (Creswell 2013; Dörnyei 2007). This study is guided by the research questions: How does Speak Dating 2024 encourage language exchange among the participants? How and why does the event foster cultural connections as well as the development of intercultural friendship? What are the challenges and possibilities opened up by multilingual and multicultural interaction using this type of informal setting? Exploring the answers to these questions will allow for rich insights into the mechanisms that enable language exchange events to be successful and the implications more generally for intercultural communication and language learning. In as much as the success in language exchanges derives from a variety of causes, the research can make useful suggestions for how future events might be structured so as to optimize learning and cultural assimilation. In addition, this research adds to the fields of study intercultural communication and language education by analyzing the ways in which unofficial, locally based programs like Speak Dating 2024 can be used as effective mechanisms for linguistic and cultural exchange. This research can be used as a model for the creation of future language exchange programs and have practical recommendations for other multicultural programs that can make them more successful. Increased awareness of the effects that Speak Dating 2024 will have will enable language professionals, educators, and cultural organizations to create more effective methods for global linguistic and cultural literacy. Scholars such as Jackson (2012) and Risager (2007) highlighted the need for genuine intercultural encounters for constructing transnational abilities and cosmopolitan orientations among students.

As one of the primary organizers of Speak Dating 2024, Polyglot.tw plays a pivotal part in building a global language learning network. Founded in 2015, Polyglot.tw is Taiwan's and Japan's first-ever polyglot community and as far as is known, the only one such initiative in East Asia. With language exchange activities in multiple cities including Taipei, Taichung, Kaohsiung, and Tainan in Taiwan, as well as Osaka and Fukuoka in Japan, Polyglot.tw provides a productive and supportive platform through which individuals can hone multiple languages, interact with speakers, and gain a greater insight into a diversity of cultures in a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. By embracing a culture that encourages communication and cultural appreciation on a consistent level, Polyglot.tw is a pioneer in the pursuit of promoting multilingualism and cross-cultural understanding in the region. Through exploring the impact of Speak Dating 2024, the current study aims to call into focus the contribution played by volunteer language learning environments into the development of intercultural communication. Its findings will provide insight into how language as a tool bridges cultures, developing meaningful global links in an increasingly interconnected world. Lastly, the research aims to consolidate the contribution played by language exchange programs into the breakdown of culture and the development of an open-minded, more global-inclined

population. This is a call for grassroots diplomacy and citizen-driven intercultural engagement echoed by scholars such as Ishikawa (2016) and Piller (2017).

One of the main parts of language learning outside the classroom involves language exchange with native speakers. With the social interactionist language learning theories, growth and acquisition in linguistic competence have a constitutive role played by communication. Speak Dating 2024 ensures a vibrant setting whereby the parties teach and learn languages during the same session, with cultural alignment facilitated by conversation. Language and cultural identity go together. Multilingual communication exposes people to cultural diversity, beliefs, and traditions. Linguistic relativity studies describe how language influences people's perception and processing of the world (Whorf 1956; Lucy 1997). This research investigates the way in which the multilingual communication in Speak Dating 2024 leads to cultural awareness and comprehension. Experiential learning occurs with educational language exchange activities. Speak Dating 2024 ensures a conducive learning setting whereby the attendants build global citizenship skills as well as linguistic competence. This research is based on the theory of translanguaging, as explicated by Ofelia García and Li Wei (2014), that understands language not as a fixed form, but as a dynamic and fluid repertoire that multilingual speakers draw upon to make meaning. Translanguaging, instead of compartmentalizing language into strict codes, brings into focus the deployment of an integrated linguistic system using speakers' full potential for communication. Speak Dating 2024 is a good example of that methodology, where participants tend to oscillate across language lines within a single conversation, from Mandarin to English, local slang, and even from gestures to visual signals. These strategies were not mere code-switching for efficiency, they were instances of translanguaging as participants strategically leveraged their linguistic assets to create mutual understanding and relational depth. By speaking with linguistic fluidity, participants' confidence and agency were enhanced, and relational respect for the linguistic diversity of other people was cultivated. By taking a translanguaging perspective on Speak Dating 2024, this research considers how such informal, grassroots events enable people to use their full linguistic repertoires without restriction by traditional language ideologies. The language tables during the event were not mere vocabulary spaces for language learning, they were spaces where meaning was co-constructed across different modalities and languages, authenticating each participant's way of conveying meaning. In this way, the event resisted monolingual norms and created a translanguaging space that encouraged collaboration, intercultural empathy, and creative linguistic negotiation. By grounding the study in the work of García and Li Wei, the research highlights how translanguaging in informal learning settings contributes not only to linguistic development but also to the cultivation of global citizenship and intercultural awareness.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research, a qualitative case study design is employed in an attempt to conduct a close examination of a particular social phenomenon, namely short, informal intercultural encounters at a community-based setting. A case study, as according to Yin (2018), would be suitable when investigating a “how” or “why” question when the researcher is not in a position to control behavioral events and when the interest pertains to contemporary events in a real-life setting. Speak Dating is a distinctive setting that is rich in culture, temporally bounded, and interactionally dynamic. It is these qualities that make it a perfect “bounded system” with which case study research can effectively be conducted (Stake, 1995). This study does not seek to make claims for all language exchange settings but instead provides detailed, context-rich insight into the meaning made by the participants at the event. A case study was chosen not only because of its contextual relevance, but also because it enables a nuanced exploration of participant experience and interaction in ways that more rigid, quantitative methods may not capture. This methodology allows for the complexity of language learning and intercultural communication to be observed as they unfold in real time. Speak Dating 2024 took place in Zhutian and consisted of brief, time-limited interchanges among speakers with various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Each interaction lasted about 60 minutes, after which the interlocutors rotated to another table or speaker. Represented languages were Mandarin, English, Japanese, Hakka, and others, depending on the group. The activity was designed to promote multilingual practice, cross-cultural curiosity, and sociability within a casual, entertaining environment. Logistics were planned by committee members, participants were escorted, and even committee members occasionally participated themselves. The design of the activity, space arrangement, and environment acted synergistically to shape the form of language interaction, not only socially meaningful but also worthy of investigation. This highly informal and interactive context replicated conditions of real-life communication and was thus a suitable location for studying spontaneous multilingual interactions and their influence on participant perceptions, linguistic confidence, and awareness of culture. In order to get a complete picture of the experience and the interactions within Speak Dating, triangulated qualitative methods were used. These comprised participant observation, field notes, informal interviewing, and collecting event artefacts. These methods each provided a different facet of the experience so that a holistic picture of the interactions could be gained. Participant observation was the primary method of data collection. The researcher became directly immersed within the event, playing various roles as table host, participant, and observer. This multi-modal role enabled various levels of data being accessed from both research subjects’ interactions and observing those of others and enhanced the depth and veracity of findings.

As table host, the researcher facilitated conversation at the Indonesian language table. As a participant, the researcher had spontaneous language conversations with visitors. As

observer, the researcher recorded participant movement, language production, and cultural references. This triangulated stance immersed the researcher within both insider and outsider views, participating within the event while at the same time observing it with an analyst's perspective. The researcher watched for how participants started and continued conversations, the methods they deployed to close language gaps, and forms of cultural exchange. The researcher also watched for body language, tone, laughter, hesitation, and gestures, those nonverbal features that had a strong bearing on interpersonal connections and meaning-making across languages. Detailed notes were taken during breaks and fleshed out immediately after the event while the memory was still fresh in mind. These field notes were composed throughout the research period and incorporated thick descriptions of events, including contextual features such as table settings, noise levels, ambiance, snippets of dialogue or paraphrased conversations, and the researcher's immediate reactions and emotional responses. This approach enables the principle of transferability in qualitative research through supplying sufficient details for readers' judgment of transferability of findings in different contexts.

In addition, a reflexive journal was used to record the researcher's changing insights, internal thoughts, and reflective criticisms. The researcher, for example, questioned herself with questions like: How is my own linguistic context influencing what I observe? Am I unintentionally leading participants in some way? What am I assuming about language skill or cultural behavior? This reflexive activity added to the credibility and transparency of the outcomes, and also recognized the researcher's role on the research itself. Reflexivity promotes an understanding of qualitative knowledge as co-constructed and guarantees that researcher bias is avoided through an awareness of one's own positionality. Although interviewing on a formal basis was not a main priority, the investigator carried out some informal follow-up interviews with some participants and organizing committee members subsequent to the event. These interviews provided insight into participant motivations, experiences of using multilingual interactions, feelings of pride, nerves, curiosity, or belonging, and views on the advantages and difficulties of the Speak Dating format. Although the interviews were not audio-recorded, main points were summarized into field notes and used to inform the interpretation of observation data. In addition to survey methods, the research also gathered and analyzed event-related documents like flyers, posters, marketing material, the official event brochure, table signs, and photographs of the event design. These visual and textual artifacts yielded details on how the event was being framed by the organizers, what value was assigned to various languages, and what symbolic strategies were being employed to invite people to participate. These artifacts enabled the researcher to know not only what had been communicated but also how intercultural messages and language ideologies had been communicated visually and spatially.

All of the qualitative data went through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which entailed coding and thematizing patterns within the dataset. The analysis was done by a systematic method. First, the researcher first engaged with the data by reading and reviewing documents and field notes to become saturated with the contents. Second, initial coding was done by coding meaningful words, deeds, or moments symbolizing concepts like cultural curiosity, language negotiation, affective response, or imbalances of power. Third, the codes were then categorized into wider thematic themes, for example: language as performance and connection, curiosity and cultural narrative, event structure impacting on interaction, and comfort, awkwardness, and negotiation of identity. Lastly, the themes were then interpreted with reference to pertinent research on language pedagogy, intercultural communication, and informal learning spaces. This thematic process enabled inductive and theory-informed understandings in support of a flexible yet grounded interpretation of the data. While remaining grounded within the data, there were also suitable theoretical perspectives brought to bear to inform interpretation. Working as a participant-researcher, the researcher recognized both the dual effect of their position: insider perspective facilitating empathetic insight, but the outside perspective enabling questioning and reflective critique of what participants took for granted. In an effort to reduce bias and increase the validity of the findings, the researcher applied measures like keeping a reflexive journal, being actively on the lookout for disconfirmatory evidence, and triangulating evidence across sources. This helped to create a balanced analysis that was both emotionally involved and analytically stringent, so a holistic picture of the Speak Dating experience could be presented. Since Speak Dating was an open, public event, the research involved minimal risk to participants. Ethical principles were followed throughout. Participants and hosts gave verbal consent, no identifiable information (such as names, faces, or personal anecdotes) was included in the findings, and everyone had the freedom to decline participation or withdraw at any time. Such ethical principles ensured that everyone who participated maintained dignity, safety, and autonomy during the research process. The study honored the voluntary and spontaneous character of the environment without compromising on thoughtful and respectful data gathering and reporting. Using participant observation, field notes, informal interviewing, and documentary data, the research presents a rich, multi-perspectival picture of individuals from a range of different backgrounds communicating across linguistic and cultural difference. Thematic analysis, reflective sensitivity, and ethical consideration ensured that the findings are meaningful, reliable, and add to the rich description of inadvertent intercultural learning that takes place within naturally occurring, community-based contexts.

Observation was the main way of collecting data in this study because it allowed the researcher to see real interactions as they happened, in a natural and friendly environment. To make sure the information was trustworthy, I took detailed field notes during and after the event, and compared them with photos, event materials, and my own reflections. This helped

the researcher cross-check what I saw and confirm that my interpretations matched what actually happened. The researcher also spent enough time at the event as a table host, participant, and observer to really understand the situation from different sides. This helped the researcher see things more clearly and avoid one-sided views.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the experience at Speak Dating 2024 Zhutian, outlining how it facilitated language exchange, fostered cultural exchanges, and made it feasible for intercultural friendship. The chapter also examines inherent challenges of multilingual, multicultural interaction within an informal context with a focus on learning and society opportunities on offer. Speak Dating 2024 generated an energetic ambiance where learning became a spontaneous, social process. The event composition, with participants spending around 60 minutes per language table and being free to move among any language table, produced dynamic exchanges and created real-time linguistic flexibility. This format prompted both participants and table leaders to prioritize meaningful, concise communication, sharpening their ability to listen, comprehend, and respond mostly using English and Mandarin language. Languages spoken at the event ranged widely from global languages such as English, Spanish, and French to less widely taught languages. This linguistic diversity led participants into engaging with not only familiar languages, but also into a process of experimentation by making an effort to communicate with languages that they had minimal, if any, previous exposure. This form of informal, interest-driven interaction fostered a sense of confidence and overcame fear of making errors with a foreign language. Many of the participants were multilingual themselves, switching effortlessly among Mandarin, English, and their respective native languages. This ease created a multilingualism culture with language no longer being a tool for communication, but a medium for humanity. Furthermore, having table leaders who were either multilingual, speaking a language that is native and also Mandarin, or even regional Taiwanese languages further reduced the communication barrier among local attendees. A table leader's ability to converse in local language, for instance, became an unexpected highlight, prompting both surprise and appreciation among participants. The inclusion of food-related vocabulary during lunch, when there were international dishes which were sold, created further linguistic immersion.

Apart from language interaction, Speak Dating 2024 served as a hub for cultural discovery. The table leaders would exchange information, traditions, and cultural idiosyncrasies from back home, making every interaction a micro-culture exchange. Discussions varied from greetings and traditional events to societal norms and philosophical ideologies. These moments not only broadened participants' cultural awareness but also humanized cultural differences, enabling a deeper appreciation of diversity. There were also conversations about several tourism places in several countries. Lectures held concurrently on the fourth floor

added further intellectual and reflective depth. For instance, a presentation about introducing national costumes encouraged audience participants to listen and wear the costumes on show. These sessions complemented downstairs conversations, which were informal, presenting a mix of structured learning and spontaneous discussion. Cultural exchange also extended beyond conversation. The event incorporated music, such as the spontaneous singing of “Jambo Bwana” with an African table leader, which became a joyful moment for the participants. These embodied, shared cultural experiences moved beyond the transactional and into the transformative laying the groundwork for lasting intercultural friendships. Previous participants indicated that Speak Dating had turned into a tradition, an annual experience to catch up with friends and continue dialogue with a progressive flow of ongoing topics. New participants, however, felt a sense of belonging and coming together, demonstrating the way that event culture helped facilitate swift social integration. Although it had numerous successes, there were also certain limitations. First, an open space layout resulted in conversations overlapping. The buzz of concurrent conversations by multiple tables created a festive ambiance, yet created auditory issues. It discovered that it was difficult hearing clearly, especially at tables being nearer the central area. This would imply that there is a need for better spatial arrangement or sound deadening methods in future versions. Second, there were no structured follow-up activities. Although spontaneous conversations were a strong point, there were a number of participants expressing an interest in ongoing engagement such as follow-up workshops, language exchange networking events, or online clubs for ongoing learning. This is an exciting prospect for event organizers to create a learning ecosystem over the longer term around the event. Lastly, accessibility is an ongoing consideration. Even though the event tilted toward inclusivity, there were still people intimidated from joining certain tables by fear of speaking English. This fear was somewhat lessened by having several of the table leaders being multilingual, yet language fear is an ongoing challenge for any multilingual, open space.

Speak Dating 2024 set an excellent precedent for experiential and cross-cultural learning. It showed that learning is not strictly confined within the classroom, and that nonformal space is fertile territory for authentic language and cross-cultural learning. The format fostered engagement, inquiry-driven interaction, and reflective listening, essential elements of global competence. By partnering with groups such as Polyglot.tw, and being able to draw participants from all over Taiwan and beyond, the event showed what could be accomplished through grassroots efforts to global citizenship. Participants took away more than a list of new vocabulary items, however. They took away new friends, new questions, and a different view of the world. While participants were metaphorically “traveling the world” in Zhutian, they were also invited to see Taiwan itself as a multilingual, multicultural society worthy of exploration and pride. Speak Dating 2024 managed to cross linguistic and cultural barriers, showing that language learning is more than learning grammar and vocabulary, it is about

establishing relationships, exchanging experiences, and immersing oneself into other people's lives. The true beauty of Speak Dating 2024 lies within its human sense of connectivity which went beyond communication. Though language exchange formed the basis of the event, it soon became clear that participants were interacting with each other on a far deeper, human plane. Gestures, smiles, laughter, and eye contact often filled in when words could not. For instance, at a few tables, people who did not speak a common language were able to convey messages through sketching, mimicking, or gesturing toward visual aids. These non-verbal tactics were not fill-in-the-gap language aids, they were at the heart of empathetic and trusting relationships. In doing so, the event served as a reminder that effective communication is not about being fluent. Sometimes, a genuine effort to connect despite language skill would provide a strong memory. These moments helped break down the need to speak perfectly, promoting a more empathetic, tolerant learning experience.

While an annual event, Speak Dating is never a once-only encounter, but a community with an increasing membership. Because it is annual, there is a feeling of continuity and shared tradition. Repeat attendees talked about waiting with anticipation for the event every year, not only for language practice, but for reuniting with individuals with which they had made a connection previously. These repeated encounters enable relationships over time, with a number of participants actually making plans for future collaborative ventures, cultural events, or future gatherings outside of the event. These repeated encounters turn Speak Dating into more than an event, more of an expression of ongoing cultural friendship and cross-cultural interest. Participants bring forth every year what is growing beyond experience and knowledge, yet it is through repeated encounters that discussion acquires depth and meaning and is made all the more valuable. The diversity of participants ranging from children and teenagers, through regular working people, into retirees brought a distinct intergenerational learning environment. The language tables were usually filled with individuals of all ages with differing perspectives and energies. Combining youth's exuberance with experience's wisdom resulted in a fertile, dynamic learning environment for all. The intergenerational element of Speak Dating is particularly important because it promotes mutual respect and understanding across age groups, not just cultures. In a society that often separates people by age or interest, this event provided a rare and valuable space for holistic connection. In addition to organized sessions and language exchanges, hospitality, logistics, and materials support all have a great impact on table leaders and overall event spirit. So often taken for granted, all of these were an important aspect of what created a warm and caring environment for participants. From the thoughtful preparation of multilingual signs and cultural decorations to the provision of water, snacks, and clear directions for table transitions, the event demonstrated a culture of intentional hospitality. Appreciations were expressed for how well the table leaders were guided, oriented via online group, and equipped with the things necessary such as transport support and fee to host the tables. This logistical support

made it possible for them to concentrate on preparation and interaction with participants. In a way, Speak Dating 2024 became a platform for language and cultural exchange and also for expressing and receiving care, connection, and friendship. The hospitality done for all whether by kind gestures, effective communication, or shared food, helped create a sense of belongingness and community. The table leaders were not language facilitators only, but were a part of a larger community effort. This culture of mutual support created spontaneous collaboration and emotional safety, which enriched face-to-face aspects of the event. The logistical smoothness and thoughtful preparation provided a layer of comfort, which made deep or engagement, trust, and joy among participants possible. These activities such as preparation of materials, guiding people, organization of space, and quietly assisting others are perhaps not visible and praised, but are essential. All these behind-the-scenes efforts laid the foundation for success for the event by making all people welcome, safe, and included. Above all, Speak Dating 2024 proved that language is more than a skill learned, it is an entry into others' reality. Through personal narratives, participants learned about everyday life elsewhere, about struggles of minority language users, even about emotional connotations of certain terms or phrases. These brief, personal exchanges were extremely effective, illustrating language's ability to carry memory, values, and a people's spirit. Speak Dating 2024 was not only about learning how to say words, it was about learning how to listen, relate, and be present. It encouraged people to step outside of their linguistic comfort zones and enter into someone else's cultural space with humility and openness. By doing so, it broke stereotypes, boosted confidence, and encouraged participants to continue venturing beyond the event. True success for Speak Dating is creating global-mindedness on a grassroots level, right within Zhutian. Through celebrating diversity and embracing difference through simple yet meaningful conversations, participants took with them more than a learned vocabulary. They took with them stories to share, friendships to foster, and a renewed sense of language's ability to unite a world. The environment of Speak Dating 2024 was particularly well suited for facilitating spontaneous, low-stakes interaction with language. In contrast with traditional presentations or introductions, the format prompted informal discussion and contextual learning. Participants unconsciously varied speech based on audience, automatically shifting registers and accessing multilingual resources, a practice consistent with that of translanguaging. This created a sense of authenticity and respect since speakers of minority or less commonly taught languages could affirm their identity within an environment that honored a multitude of linguistic repertoires. In addition, the event's decor, with open tables, and multilingual welcoming signs, acted functionally and symbolically. It created a feeling of inclusion, reducing barriers for newcomers and reinforcing the idea that every language has a place. Multilingual signage also helped create ambient exposure to different scripts, phonetic systems, and cultural associations, prompting participants to explore even tables of languages they had never encountered before. Recurrent throughout the data was the use of

laughter and humor to facilitate connectivity. Humor functioned as an important leveler: it put people at ease and allowed them to speak without fear of being judged. In a number of tables, participants applied jokes or culturally relevant idioms as bridges for describing words or social rules. These exchanges were particularly useful for building emotional relationships and often generated longer conversations beyond the 60-minute sessions. Through such moments of humor, language became a vehicle for practice, yes, and for enjoyment. In addition, a number of participants reported on the place of emotion within learning. A few were touched when others made an effort at a newcomer's native language, even if only a few words. Others reported moments of pride when they were able to teach someone else a new expression. These affective reactions serve to emphasize the relational aspects of language exchange. Speak Dating was not only cognitive; it was emotional. Learning occurred because people felt seen, respected, and invited into each other's linguistic world. One area of strength frequently mentioned by attendees was the perceived safety of the space. Participants stated that unlike in classrooms or exams, they did not feel pressure to "perform" perfectly. The errors were accepted and even embraced, which created a shared ethic of learning through teamwork, not rivalry. This psychological safety is a foundation of effective informal learning and a reason why Speak Dating worked so well at making people more open about participation. Another theme that emerged throughout the data was the sensitivity for global linguistic diversity that participants gained. The event opened the participants' eyes about what language is spoken where, or what phrases convey multiple meanings. This greater sensitivity often included inquiry into history, migration, colonization, and diaspora demonstrating that even brief language exchange can precipitate thoughtful, sophisticated thought. Finally, the event left an enduring impression because it disrupted the norms of conventional language education. Instead of focusing on correctness, it focused on connection. Instead of ranking proficiency, it honored effort and curiosity. The organic, people-centered atmosphere helped participants reframe what it means to "succeed" in language learning. It was less about learning a language overnight, yet more about making a first move toward communicating, connecting, and co-creating meaning amidst differences. These findings justify the conclusion that informal, interest-based, intercultural events such as Speak Dating carry tremendous pedagogical and societal value. They reveal people's learning, accommodation, and relationship-building processes in multilingual contexts and offer a replicable model toward community-based language education with great potential for impacting policies, practices, and future research.

CONCLUSION

Speak Dating 2024 provided a compelling example of just how nonformal community events can encourage rich language exchange, enhance cultural understanding and empathy, and build linguistic confidence and global citizenship. Operating within a multilingualism of

inclusivity and relationally, the event allowed those who attended not only to engage with new sets of words but also new approaches to being in the world, new values, and perspectives. Such findings validate that nonformal language acquisition does not have to be limited by conventional classroom models. To the contrary, it can thrive through spontaneous discussion, mutual interest, and common humanity. Most significantly among its offerings was Speak Dating 2024's ability to transform language from technical know-how into an avowedly social, deeply humane art. Participants were not just acquiring various vocabularies; they were developing a capacity for relating to one another from within transcultural and multilingual frames. This study confirms that these events do more than prepare for language acquisition, they foster empathy, humility, and cross-cultural friendship. Language in this context became a bridge, an opening for mutual understanding not only of words but of lived lives, passions, and perceptions.

The translanguaging power was amply expressed throughout the event. As speakers traversed linguistic boundaries, they accessed their entire linguistic repertoires in order to communicate. The practice shifting back and forth between different languages using gestures, visual aids, and nonverbal communications was not simply accepted but even celebrated. It legitimized each individual's speech and being. It illustrated that people do not need fluency in one language but an openness for connection. Speak Dating 2024 therefore instantiated a translanguaging environment, an environment in which people constructed meanings in collaboration and in flow freely, not in fear of judgment. This sort of environment in which languages blend together and people respect each other's identity is necessary if one needs to build trust and intercultural awareness. More importantly, Speak Dating broke myths around dominant ideologies that place a premium on standard language proficiency as acquisition and achievement. Rather than ranking people for ability, Speak Dating promoted interaction for interest, effort, and respect for one another. The values were reversed from perfection to participation, from performance to presence. The environment lowered live language anxiety and enabled people to experiment and develop through nonformal practice. People reported noting that they were in a safe environment to experiment talking in unknown-to-them languages and were often rewarded by encouragement, patience, and support from both table leaders and fellow speakers. The psychological safety is an important prerequisite for successful learning and one in which conventional classroom settings often fall short.

In addition to language, Speak Dating provided a fertile ground for exploring culture. Every interaction had a possibility of micro-exchange of culture whether through discussion of traditional ways of life, imitation of local wit, or learning a proverb or a lullaby. These exchanges were a window into others' realities, often precipitating conversations about

identity, belonging, and being human. Participants left with more than a collection of new words, with questions and reflections. Through doing so, language learning was made synonymous with learning about culture, and learning about culture with language. Hospitality was not just about comfort, it was a silent communicator of respect and inclusion. These forms of activities, such as preparing materials, arranging space, and offering emotional and logistical support, created the foundation for participants to feel safe, relaxed, and open. This kind of behind-the-scenes care illustrates how the structure of an event directly influences the quality of human interaction it supports. The recurring presence of returning participants and the emergence of long-term connections show that Speak Dating 2024 was not a one-time encounter, but the cultivation of a growing community. Its annual character helped provide a sense of continuity, tradition, and shared memory. Most participants mentioned that they anticipated participating in the event annually, not just to exercise language, but also to reconnect with friends, catch up on life, and pick up on intercultural exchanges started in past years. This feeling of relational continuity reinforces the perception that language learning is less about transactions, more about community. It also leaves open the prospect of leveraging events like these for ongoing collaborative ventures, cultural endeavors, or ongoing intercultural mentorship.

From an educational point of view, Speak Dating illustrates the potential and value for experiential learning. In contrast with traditional education, relying often on fixed curricula and assessment, informal language exchange facilitates spontaneous, situated learning. This type of learning is intimate, context-rich, and socio-oriented. This type of learning leverages natural students' desire for learning and for connectivity. These implications hold significant importance for language teachers and program developers: making space for voluntary, interest-driven interaction beyond class can serve to dramatically enhance student motivation, confidence, and intercultural skill. Integrating informal, student-led components into traditional curricula could offer a richer, human-scale approach to language learning. For event planners, this research suggests further incorporation of organized follow-up activities to prolong such events' impact. Though spontaneity was a particular strength of Speak Dating, participants widely indicated a desire for ongoing engagement through workshops, online conversations, or regular get-togethers. Developing a more sustained network of language exchange could facilitate longer-term learning objectives while extending relationships started at the event. Furthermore, greater intentional focus on accessibility including accommodation for beginner-level speakers, individuals with alternate mobility or language abilities, and intergenerational inclusion, increases event accessibility even further in future versions.

This research also invites future scholarly attention to the long-term effects of nonformal language exchange experiences. While the immediate outcomes are promising, increased confidence, expanded vocabulary, and greater cultural empathy further research is needed to examine how such experiences influence participants' language development, worldview, and intercultural communication skills over time. A longitudinal investigation could examine whether and in what manner participants integrate observations or language practices from Speak Dating into everyday life, work, or future interactions. Ultimately, Speak Dating 2024 confirms that language learning is a human act. It is more than the transfer of knowledge, it is co-creation of meaning. Language is emotional, relational, and social. Most importantly, it opens doors, knocks down barriers, and sows humility. In an age of polarization and cultural confusion, events such as Speak Dating serve to remind us that communication is founded upon listening, respect, and presence. The smiles, laughter, shared meals, and small kindnesses witnessed throughout the event are not incidental to language, they are language. They are a description of the way by which we say, "I see you," even when we do not speak a common tongue. Speak Dating 2024 offers a replicable model of people-driven, place-based language education. It demonstrates that cities and towns are conversational. They are places within which, across languages, people can gather, learn non-linguistic ways of being together, even while learning a language. Speak Dating 2024 is a call to educators, institutions, and policymakers that some of the most powerful learning is not classroom based, yet happens by being present, open, and unafraid, within open, inclusive places. In essence, it is a reflection of the principle that actions taken locally, if driven by care, curiosity, and a desire for inclusion, hold global potential. In conclusion, Speak Dating 2024 teaches us that language education's future is not about only imaginary books or exams, yet about shared tables, open hearts, and learning the bravery of speaking into, and being transformed by, difference. Speak Dating 2024 demonstrates that language is more than saying the right things, it is being present, extending oneself toward a human being and yielding oneself in the process. Through such encounters, we learn more than a language and become more empathetic, engaged citizens of planet Earth.

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