Enriching Students' Cross-Cultural and Multilingual Communication: The Serious Play Approach Utilizing Playmobil Pro Figures

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Abstract

Playmobil pro is an innovative modelling kit for adults that encourages creative thinking in the university/workplace. International multilingual students often disclose that they have little opportunity to develop their intercultural awareness, and cross-cultural and multilingual communicative competencies while engaging in meaningful activities that foster sustainable content and language learning. In the present study, 35 students were involved in two Playmobil pro workshops. They worked individually to present themselves to their peers, referring to their cultural background. They then worked in groups to explore intercultural differences among people working for organizations operating in the UK and another country of their choice and offer recommendations to help organizations avoid cross-cultural conflicts. The aim was to actively engage students to work on their final assignment and develop their intercultural awareness and cross-cultural communicative skills. This case study used a qualitative design and explored students' attitudes by asking them to write a short anonymous report at the end of the implementation and provide anonymous feedback via Mentimeter after each workshop. The lecturer also kept notes in the form of a diary during this implementation. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data which revealed that Playmobil pro facilitated intercultural communication in the post-COVID-19 era as students seemed to be unwilling to work with their peers in face-to-face classes, possibly suffering from trauma. However, learners confessed that they needed more time, support, and artefacts to fully present their ideas and thoughts. Recommendations for the effective implementation of Playmobil pro with multilingual students will be offered.

Keywords: Playmobil pro, post-COVID-19 student recovery, multilingual students, content and language learning attitudes, cross-lingual communication, intercultural awareness

Game-based learning is used to engage students in the learning process, increase their bonding and interaction (Eutsler, 2021), and stretch their retention of the knowledge and skills (Tavares, 2022) received beyond a single often repetitive teacher-led lecture. Serious Games (SG), for example Lego as a Serious Play (LSP) and Playmobil pro, which involve the use of learning strategies such as role play and storytelling, enhance learning and behaviour change through amusement and are employed in various fields, including Higher Education (HE), health, language education, business, and even the army and aviation, in order to help future aviation managers develop a full understanding of the complex nature of aviation emergency response and crisis management (Griggs et al., 2019; Ishaq et al., 2022). In order to use gamification in HE successfully, educators need to understand how game elements can drive students' content and language learning behaviours so that they may improve their academic performance (Eltahir et al., 2021). The use of Playmobil pro in HE is in its infancy. There are only a handful of cases of published research in which Playmobil pro has been used in: (a) teacher education both undergraduate and postgraduate (Marfisi-Schottman et al., 2022; Souliotou, 2021), (b) computing (Nass Bauer & Trapp, 2019), (c) arts (Souliotou, 2021), (d) people and change management (Griehsel & Riester-Gnädinger, 2019), (e) organizational management (Hauser & Amann, 2023), (f) language education (Clausen & Hoinkes, 2022), and (g) crisis management (Lefevre-Scelles et al., 2022).

This article explores the use of Playmobil pro in a business and management school in the UK. It was used to develop international undergraduate students' intercultural awareness and promote cross-cultural communication in terms of a Human Resource Management (HRM) course. While using Playmobil pro, students were encouraged to use a multilingual approach (allowing them to use words and short phrases in their native languages) while communicating informally in their groups. This allowed them to learn various terms in other languages and develop a better understanding of their peers' heritage languages and cultural backgrounds. Playmobil pro aspired to improve undergraduate students' learning attitudes and facilitate multilingual and multicultural student interaction in the post-COVID-19 era as students seemed hesitant to engage in face-to-face collaboration and interplay after two and a half years of remote learning due to the pandemic. The learners had not been involved in game-based learning of any kind previously and were quite uncertain about participating in this intervention as working with Playmobil pro figures seemed childish at first.

However, taking into consideration students' feedback, this learning intervention allowed them to reflect on their assignment, receive and provide peer support and make friends at a time when most university students felt isolated. This study also aimed to explore the value of using game-based learning to enhance students' intercultural awareness in terms of a newly designed module on international human resource management. Modules on intercultural communication are a new trend in HRM as cultural aspects are often neglected in management studies. This case study intended to determine students' attitudes towards this innovative approach, Playmobil pro, to enhance students' intercultural competencies in HE. One of the main goals of this intervention was to achieve a major increase in student motivation, engagement, interpersonal communication, empathy and academic achievement through the use of a novel game-based technique in HE (Herrera-Velasquez, 2020). This study will

potentially encourage more lecturers to experiment with Playmobil pro to develop multilingual students' intercultural skills, and thereby increase their interest in content and language learning. Playmobil pro may allow learners to develop their social skills while working on their assignments. The research questions the study intended to address were:

- What is the impact of Playmobil pro on undergraduate multilingual students' attitudes towards content and language learning?
- What are undergraduate multilingual students' perceptions of the impact of Playmobil pro workshops on the development of their intercultural awareness and cross-cultural communicative competence?

In the next section, the existing literature on game-based learning will be explored. Subsequently, the methodology of the study will be described. A discussion of the findings and implications of the study will follow. Finally, the contribution and limitations of this study and recommendations will be presented as a conclusion to this article.

Literature Review

Game-based learning has gained increasing interest among progressive-minded educators as an important driver of motivation, innovation, engagement, and productivity in educational contexts. Games are usually associated with the ludic nature of the human being (Arlt & Arlt, 2023). They are also essential and convenient tools for entertainment, recreation, and behavioural change (Hammady & Arnab, 2022). Games may offer enjoyment, structure, motivation, ego gratification, creativity, social interaction, and emotion, satisfying the human need for learning and development (Boghian et al., 2019; Stenholm et al., 2019). Recently, game-based learning has become increasingly important within formative action, promoting the "ludic epistemology" theory which intends to identify ways to encode knowledge in the form of games and how to shape the process of knowledge and skills acquisition like a process of playing (So & Seo, 2018).

The use of game-based learning relies on constructivist theories of learning (Bakan & Bakan, 2018) which promote students' active role and support the development of higher taxonomic levels of knowledge. As learning is problem-based, these games involve the development of stories, either real or fictional, in which the learner plays a role, identifies with what is happening in that fictional game world and actively resolves problems and overcomes challenges. The educator's role is to design appropriate games, by creating inspiring contexts, providing artifacts and an interesting problem to resolve or stimulate reflection. The lecturer offers suitable guidance and feedback on learners' development during the game and its outcomes. Game-based learning helps students develop appropriate mental models (Plass et al., 2020). The psycho-pedagogical use of games from the constructivist perspective also generates changes in educational practice (Rosa-Castillo et al., 2022). The educator assumes a more discrete role as his/her aim is predominantly formative, problematic, applicative, interactive, of counseling and guidance rather than lecturing.

Roos and colleagues (2004, p. 15) refer to SG as activities that "draw on the imagination, integrate cognitive, social and emotional dimensions of experience and intentionally bring the emergent benefits of play to bear on organizational challenges". Serious gaming asks students to "think with the hands through creating a model" (Roos & Victor, 1999, p. 328). It is based on the theory of tacit integration which was developed by Polanyi (1969). This maintains that students know the answers to the questions posed but are completely unaware of that. The answers emerge through playing and engaging in SG which hide amazing intuitive playful features (Argasiński & Węgrzyn, 2019). The role of SG is becoming quite prominent in companies (Larson, 2020), as they bring significant cognitive, emotional, and social benefits for the employees/learners by encouraging meaningful play often among linguistically and culturally diverse teams (McCusker, 2020).

Playmobil has raised many generations of young people, serving as an educational toy, and encouraging imaginative play, interaction, and creativity. It can engage young people for hours while they try to express their ideas and feelings and build their own world engaging in meaningful storytelling. Lately, Playmobil pro has been used by adults in professional/educational settings to support teams in prototyping, project management, and creative workshops (Rapp et al., 2019). It was created to respond to the needs of people to engage in meaningful game-based activities while working together as the introduction of playful elements in group work tends to help people achieve better results (Kasurinen & Knutas, 2018; Petelczyc et al., 2018). The Playmobil pro method is based on a combination of modelling, which relies on personal stories, as participants try to address Socratic questions working in groups and develop their problem-solving, interpersonal/intercultural communication, empathy, and negotiation skills (Goria, 2022).

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and especially business schools, which currently welcome increasing numbers of international multilingual students in the UK, can possibly gain from utilizing Playmobil pro by adding a certain playful quality to required seminars. Playmobil pro is especially good for subjects involving people, which makes it ideal for HRM (Parkin, 2023). The fun and visual set-up of Playmobil pro facilitates the fast creation of organigrams, planning and development, and the creation of teams/groups. It also helps people express themselves more easily and become more approachable as they engage in meaningful play and remember the times when they were young and devoted hours playing and creating their own fantasy worlds. Playmobil pro can thus help students overcome mental health issues, problems, and barriers they may face in their everyday life (Huen et al., 2016; Stone, 2019).

Moreover, in a progressively globalised business world, many companies operate in multicultural and multilingual contexts. In Europe, due to increased mobility and migration, the number of people from diverse backgrounds continues to increase and the significance of culturally and linguistically responsive education is becoming more prominent (Haan, J., 2022). As cultural and linguistic diversity in the UK grows, there exist crucial implications for all senior leadership teams and HE lecturers, necessitating skills and knowledge in multilingual and cross-cultural communication and intercultural awareness to enable them to deeply understand and provide for different people's needs (Han et al., 2020). Cultural diversity can

bring potential conflicts due to misunderstandings and biases associated with essential differences among students of dissimilar national backgrounds. Leaders need to develop competencies to mitigate risks arising from cross-cultural conflicts facilitating cross-lingual communication in multilingual teams and effectively managing behaviours and attitudes in multicultural and multilingual corporations (Yousof & Abousamra, 2019).

Conflicts can be further magnified due to crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, that prohibit face-to-face contact and closer collaboration. The main challenges associated with multilingual and multicultural employees and students include the following aspects: introversion, the inability to communicate in the target language, the lack of punctuality, and different facial expressions and gestures (Yanaprasart & Lüdi, 2018).

Even though the significance of intercultural and multilingual professional development is widely recognised, very few companies and HEI offer comprehensive training courses/modules in intercultural awareness and multilingual communication in the workplace/HE. Most of the time, the development of intercultural and multilingual competencies is only associated with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning although there are formal ways to assess intercultural competencies in the workplace, and there are also informal tests (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013), quizzes (Sabet et al., 2022), and group activities. Moreover, there is very little research into the development of intercultural and multilingual competencies as well as inclusion of intercultural awareness and multilingual communication topics in HE curricula (Shepherd, 2019).

This article addresses the need for professional learning development for HE students' and future professionals' intercultural awareness and cross-cultural multilingual communication by focusing on designing and developing Playmobil pro workshops. A well-designed SG, for instance Playmobil pro, provides a medium in which learners apply theories to real-world contexts (Meletiadou, 2023). Playing with Playmobil pro, students typically become more interested in the actual game, and this also increases their content and language learning outcomes (Wronowski et al., 2020). Moreover, SG's implementation in classes has indicated that they improved retention rates and encouraged creative exploration (Silva, 2019). Despite the encouraging results, little attention has been paid to the effect of the use of Playmobil pro on the development of students' intercultural and multilingual competencies (Stadler, 2022). This is the gap the researcher intends to address with this case study.

Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative methodology (Mey, 2022) and collected qualitative data, including a tutor's observations and anonymous student feedback via Mentimeter twice, immediately after each one of the two workshops, and a student report at the end of the implementation (see Table 1) in response to the research questions of the study. She used thematic analysis to analyse data from students' feedback and triangulated the data with the lecturer's observations by comparing the main themes to increase the reliability and the overall quality and significance of the study (Lemon & Hayes, 2020).

Table 1
Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative data
Sample: 35 students and 1 lecturer
Sources of Data: 1. Anonymous peer feedback via Mentimeter after each workshop 2. Final student report after the implementation 3. Lecturer's observations about the workshops and students' response to the implementation
Method of analysis: Thematic analysis of students' anonymous feedback and reports. Triangulation with data from observations.
Coders: Researcher and an assistant

Thirty-five international undergraduate students (Table 2) attended a module on International Human Resource Management. This introduced them to the developing field of cross-cultural and cross-lingual management explored in relation to both international and intra-national contexts, and drawing on perspectives from social anthropology, social psychology, linguistics, organisational behaviour, and management theory. Students attended a 3-hour workshop every week for 12 weeks (one academic semester). Learners were asked to take part in an initial 3-hour Playmobil pro session in which they had to present themselves and talk about their cultural background and their aspirations for the future using Playmobil pro. Students were given about 30-45 minutes to choose the right artefacts and prepare their story working individually first and then in groups so that they could receive feedback and get to know each other. Using a multilingual approach, the lecturer encouraged students to use words and phrases from their mother tongue to help them feel more psychologically safe and enhance their oral fluency. They were then asked to share their story in class. This was used as an ice-breaking activity to allow students to get to know each other and form groups to work for their final group assignment and presentation.

Table 2
Student Demographic Characteristics

	Students	**Frequency**
	Male	16
Gender	Female	19
Age	21-30	26
	30-40	9
Ethnic background	Asian	25
	European	8
	American	2

Students were then involved in a second Playmobil session after they were taught the various intercultural and cross-lingual theories and discussed relevant case studies. In groups of 3-4 students, learners were asked to choose a country of their choice, under the guidance of their instructor, from a list of countries she provided and discuss possible 'culture clashes' and cross-lingual misunderstandings that may occur when a company coming from the UK would decide to expand in a country, for example China, which was significantly different – in terms of culture – when compared to the UK. Students had to use the relevant theories, conduct research into cross-cultural and cross-lingual issues, international human resource management practices and case studies which presented similar cultural clashes. A multilingual approach was used to enable these learners to occasionally use some terms and phrases in their mother tongue to facilitate interpersonal communication and allow students to fully understand the theories, terms in various national/cultural contexts and the instructions of their assignment.

Students were asked to provide feedback after each one of the two Playmobil Pro workshops regarding their overall experience and how it affected their content and language learning motivation, their perceived group performance in the final assignments and the development of their intercultural awareness as well as their cross-cultural and cross-lingual communicative competence (Figure 1). The investigator received ethics clearance for the study from London Metropolitan University and students provided their written informed consent. The researcher promised all learners confidentiality and anonymity. Students were assured that non-participation in the study would not affect their grades in any way. The main aim of the study was to increase students' interaction and support them as students frequently find lectures prosaic and ask for alternative approaches to content and language learning that often enhance their creativity and reflection.

Figure 1

Playmobil Pro Implementation Scheme
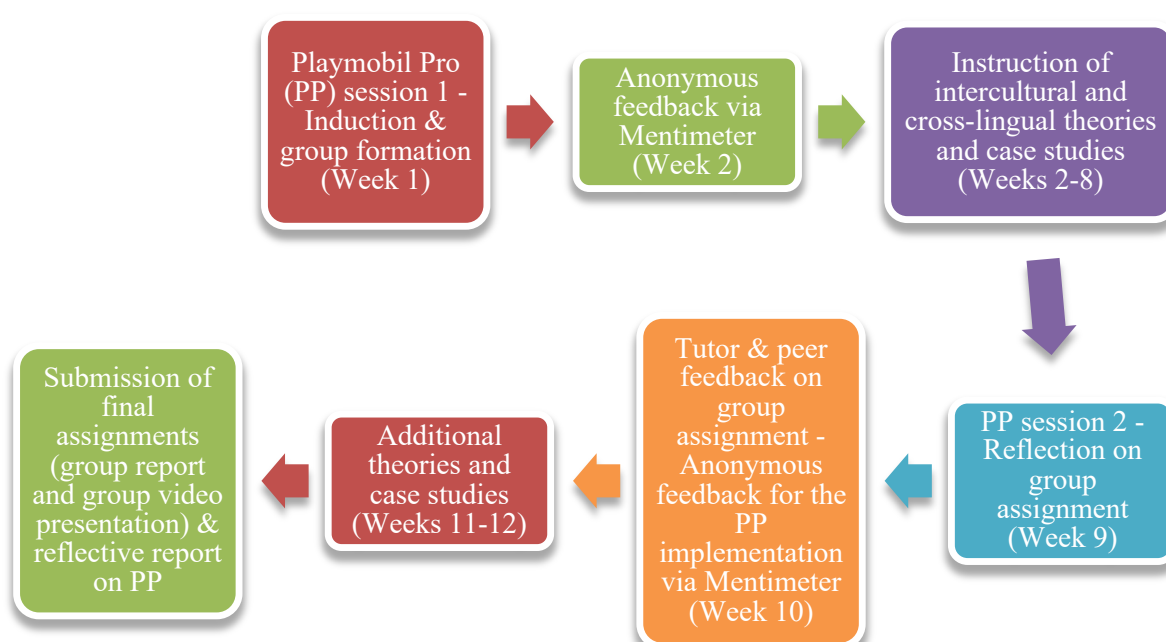
The lecturer also kept some notes in the form of a diary during this implementation. This allowed her to reflect on the implementation design and further support the students depending on their feedback and reactions during the two Playmobil pro workshops. During the implementation, the following rules of communication applied: (1) everyone was allowed to communicate with other students and groups; (2) language(s) of communication could be chosen freely while the language of the assignment was non-negotiable and was English; (3) participants were free to use any channels of communication for exchange of information; (4) the participants had to abide by the game agenda and the time plan. The Playmobil pro set also included unpainted Playmobil characters and accessories (Zahn, 2019). Students were asked to give meaning to their creations without any limits, and the lack of features allowed them to interpret their ideas and characters in multiple ways taking into consideration their own cultural background. Finally, this research project intended to stress the significance of: (a) drawing to expand their ideas in the brainstorming process and, (b) using hands to communicate thinking through the tactile material to assist students who could not articulate by writing, for instance neurodiverse, dyslexic or low-performing English as a Second Language students. The main aim was to promote inclusion for all students, irrespective of their background and personal characteristics, thus embracing diversity and fostering tolerance and acceptance for all students.

Findings

Impact of Playmobil Pro on Students

The investigator employed thematic analysis to examine the perceived impact of Playmobil pro on students' approaches towards content and language learning and the development of their intercultural competencies (Herzog et al., 2019). She collected qualitative data from learners (anonymous feedback and a report). Analysis of the data revealed several themes, including "enhanced collaboration and intercultural communication" and "promoted experiential, interpersonal, and deep learning" (Table 3). Data were then triangulated with the instructor's comments in her diary (Natow, 2020). Although the researcher designed the intervention and guided another lecturer who facilitated Playmobil pro workshops during her sessions, a research assistant analyzed 15% of the data collected to address researcher bias (Johnson et al., 2020).

Table 3

Impact of Playmobil Pro on Students

Themes (frequency of occurrence in students' data)	Sample Student Comments
Positive Impact	
1. Improved engagement facilitating intercultural and multilingual exchange due to positive emotions (34)	*Lectures are boring. The use of Playmobil pro allows us to interact more and learn from peers from other cultures and speak other languages. We could then better understand our differences, make friends, and feel better…*
2. Enhanced collaboration and intercultural and cross-lingual communication (33)	*I love working with my peers and exchanging information about potential causes of conflicts or misunderstandings taking into consideration various cultural and linguistic backgrounds….*
3. Developed group identity, ethical thinking, and cross-cultural empathy (31)	*We are not alone. We have to work as a group, respect each other, be fair and distribute the workload accordingly. We also need to understand that people work differently in different contexts…*
4. Promoted experiential, interpersonal, and deep learning (30)	*We learn by doing rather than reading or listening all the time. This is so invigorating. I can better understand things as I can ask many questions.*
5. Promoted a global mindset and a rule-based culture (focus on fairness) (30)	*I have to think about my peers and take into consideration their needs as well. There are rules I need to abide by. I am not alone. I have to be fair and show empathy and other awareness.*
6. Impact on development of intercultural and cross-lingual awareness and trust (29)	*I now understand that people can behave quite differently. They have different mindsets and norms. I need to be mindful, build trust and ensure we get along. We have to, as we are in the same team.*
7. Involvement in meaningful & memorable exchanges (27)	*I can now make sense of the theories as I have the time to discuss them with my friends while we are preparing our story. I will never forget the enjoyable time we had together and our final artifact and story. It was an amazing experience.*
Challenges	
8. Establish English as the working language (14)	*I do not like it when people use their own language as I cannot understand them. It is annoying. However, I also do it when I cannot express myself well in English. I guess we need to be tolerant and work our way through languages…*

9.	Differences in communication styles (8)	*I hate spending hours negotiating and analysing the same thing over and over again. I prefer action rather than words and arguments…*
10.	Differing degrees of cooperation and motivation (6)	*Some students are not that willing to work with me and contribute. They prefer working individually. They are selfish. This is a bit demotivating as they are unwilling to engage in real communication while we are working…*
11.	Lack of time and artefacts (4)	*We need more time. This is our first time with Playmobil. We need time, support from our lecturer and possibly more Playmobil figures to fully express our ideas…*

The investigator combined findings from students' anonymous feedback and final reports regarding the Playmobil pro implementation and realised that students were initially reluctant to engage with this innovative game-based strategy due to lack of experience (Table 3, Comment 8). However, they soon became actively involved and spent considerable time developing their intercultural and cross-lingual awareness and enhancing their collaborative and interpersonal skills while demonstrating curiosity and excitement about this new learning technique (Table 3, Comment 2).

These outcomes – which were also corroborated with the instructor's comments in her diary about this challenging intervention – confirmed findings from several studies in other settings (Rapp et al., 2019). Students were demotivated by long lectures without any possibility of interacting with their peers due to lack of interpersonal exchange. Playmobil pro allowed meaningful student engagement which created positive emotions (Table 3, Comment 1). These supported an affiliation function (Carmona-Halty et al., 2021), increasing engagement and interpersonal interaction amongst group members through developing their own and others' ideas and encouraging intercultural and cross-lingual communication (Rhee, 2022). These group interactions in the post-COVID-19 era built strong group social resources, such as a sense of belonging, social and psychological support, group bonds, a feeling of intimacy, and friendship (Patulny & Bower, 2022).

Games, such as Playmobil pro, seem to create virtual worlds which promote freedom and exploration (Bowersox, 2022) as students are asked to assume various roles and identities. They provide a psychologically safe risk-free context where students can experiment without experiencing the impact of failure in real life (Parkin, 2023). On the contrary, failure is part of the learning game and allows students to reflect on their shortcomings and try out new options (Andres et al., 2024). In the context of Playmobil pro, students seem to be able to experience intercultural and cross-lingual conflicts from different points of view in safe and controlled settings and learn how to cope with them in real life (Table 3, Comment 4 and 6).

Nevertheless, students did report some communication challenges, for instance due to the use of other languages than English (Table 3, Comment 8). However, they did realize that this forms part of the intercultural and cross-lingual communication challenges multinational teams in organisation face globally. Since students wanted to work in similar contexts, they had to learn how to be flexible and work effectively with people from diverse backgrounds minimising any possibility for prolonged disruption and harnessing the benefits of diversity. Serious games seem to be particularly helpful for training. Therefore, Playmobil pro may offer an immersive and engaging context where participants 'learn by doing' often making mistakes in a controlled environment. Taking into consideration students' feedback, this trial and error-based method apparently enhances content and language learning, improves group work, the development of social skills, leadership, and cooperation.

Discussion

Culture may determine success or failure in everyday face-to-face encounters in organisations globally. People often have expectations when they enter conversations which are related to culture and language. They are frequently affected by their cultural values and linguistic backgrounds in their personal and professional lives. Moreover, individuals repeatedly apply their own cultural lens every time they interact with their colleagues and negotiate with their customers at work. Therefore, people working in multinational companies and/or culturally diverse settings, for example in the UK, need to be aware of the cultural and linguistic differences which can become a source of confusion, misunderstanding, and most importantly, conflict. Awareness of these disparities and an openness to assume different cultural perspectives are important for the development of students' intercultural competencies and the promotion of meaningful conversations based on trust, empathy, and other awareness (Table 3, Comments 2, 3 & 6). Therefore, HE lecturers can choose to cultivate students' intercultural and crosslinguistic skills through appropriate learning strategies such as Playmobil pro sessions, as indicated in this case study.

As Playmobil pro sessions require students to engage in a microcosm of the social world, with its own inclusions and exclusions, learners will have to face when they graduate, students become prepared for the negotiations they have to make to survive in diverse work settings (Vari, 2021). Moreover, taking into consideration the physiological impact of positive emotions that learners often experience (Marfisi-Schottman et al., 2022) when they engage in such sessions, as well as the impact of enjoyable play on the brain, one can safely conclude that Playmobil pro apparently relieves some of the anxiety that international multilingual learners feel when they engage in real-life face-to-face encounters promoting memorable exchanges that advance deep experiential learning (Table 3, Comments 4 &7).

During Playmobil pro sessions, students revealed that they felt optimistic about their relationships with their peers and happy about learning things in such an engaging way (Table 3, Comment 1). Therefore, one may conclude that Playmobil pro creates the urge to play and pushes the limits for multilingual students to be creative not only in social and physical behaviour, but also in intellectual and artistic behaviour (Parkin, 2023). Experiencing

playfulness, mindfulness, compassion, empathy, and hope activates the body's parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) (Zhou et al., 2019). This allows international multilingual students to open up and be more receptive to new ideas, feelings and other individuals and enhances their cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication (Moreno et al.,2019).

Playmobil pro facilitates flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and psychological safety and assists participants to gain valuable insights confirming similar previous research on LSP. These two game-based techniques seem to promote storytelling and metaphors to examine the intrinsic meanings that students try to convey (Harn & Hsiao, 2018). By completely immersing into play, students lose their sense of self and reveal their true selves, ideas and identities allowing room for deep reflection, thus advancing towards increased academic achievement (Wringley & McCusker, 2019). Other-awareness and perspective-taking are inherent in the design of Playmobil pro and facilitate developing a global mindset and setting rules ensuring fair play. This allows international students to develop valuable professional skills extremely useful for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic encounters. Students also revealed that the impact of the Playmobil pro sessions last longer than repetitive lectures (Table 5, Comment 7). Khasawneh and colleagues (2024) indicate that positive memories after the learning experience enhance knowledge and skill retention and increase social resources such as social support and connections amongst people, especially relatively shy international learners, which students can further develop in their professional life.

Moreover, when lecturers refer to the development of conflict management practices in students, they include a wide range of strategies, such as communication, problem solving, dealing with emotion, understanding positions, negotiation and mediation (Gorostidi et al., 2023). In HE, the challenge for educators is to prepare future employees and managers to channel cross-cultural and cross-linguistic conflicts into constructive responses (Kubicek et al., 2019). and consider them as opportunities for stimulating relations and moving towards group cohesion. Intercultural and cross-linguistic conflicts define the implicit or explicit emotional struggle or frustration between individuals from different cultures over perceived incompatible morals, values, norms, face concerns, goals, scarce resources, processes, and/or outcomes in a communication situation (Yamasaki & Prat, 2021). To help students resolve related challenges and deal with such situations, lecturers may consider exploring the different aspects and levels of intercultural and cross-lingual clashes, as well as their impact on the involved parts and on the overall classroom dynamics through SG, for instance Playmobil pro workshops. They could thus promote a situated learning approach (Wandl et al.,2019) which is embedded in the constructivist learning paradigm (Chuang, 2021). This can provide meaningful learning experiences by involving multilingual learners in authentic learning environments based on real world experiences. In such contexts, knowledge can be transformed into action competencies and support content and language learning (Table 3, Comments 4 & 7).

To sum up, various authors have showcased the significance of SG, like Playmobil pro, for educational purposes, especially in HE (Andres et al., 2024; Zahn, 2019). Playmobil pro seems to promote a learner-centred approach as students can learn at their own pace and receive

scaffolding by their peers, depending on their learning style and their individual needs as they interact in terms of the game overcoming potential challenges (Table 3, Comments 9 &10). This may further facilitate educators in HE as they often have large cohorts and significant time constraints. To sum up, learners in this case study expressed their interest in engaging in more Playmobil pro sessions as they thought they create meaningful learning and development experiences, especially in terms of intercultural training, by simulating highly interactive scenarios where students have to face and resolve real-world problems without worrying about the risks.

Conclusion

Plato was the one of the first philosophers who recognised the significance of purposeful play for learning and development (Wilkinson, 2016). The findings of this case study corroborated previous research indicating that HE lecturers should consider using innovative game-based learning tools that may support teaching by enhancing students' intercultural competencies in an entertaining and engaging way (Köroğlu & Kimsesiz, 2023). These may also enhance students' academic performance and promote student autonomy and empowerment (Westera, 2019). However, very little – if any – research exists exploring how Playmobil pro can be used in HE to develop students' intercultural and cross-linguistic skills preparing them for future professional challenges as they will most probably need to work in highly diverse multi-cultural environments.

Playmobil pro apparently promotes an active experiential approach to content and language learning that has been increasingly used in education lately as it brings significant benefits for the learners. However, despite its promise in HE, there are numerous challenges involved in developing and implementing highly effective games. Since the role of educator in developing game-based approaches that promote students' intercultural and cross-linguistic awareness is critical, more research needs to explore how educators can be supported if SG, such as Playmobil pro, are to be widely adopted in HE and become mainstream.

Recently, SG have become increasingly popular as a didactic tool in business schools to develop students' professional skills and enhance intercultural and crosslinguistic learning. Intercultural and cross-linguistic competencies – which include social, communicative, and performative skills and capabilities and are seen as key competencies of the 21st century – can be developed through SGs, like Playmobil pro. Playmobil pro involves complexity, uncertainty in decision-making process, and a relative freedom of action, but also time pressure, role conflicts and conflicts of interest which aim at an enhancement of cultural, linguistic, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural expertise. Playmobil pro seems to usher in new opportunities for developing immersive learning context where intercultural and cross-linguistic encounters and interactions are promoted, while students also practice their professional skills, for example negotiation in a risk-free environment.

Therefore, Playmobil pro may prove to be useful in HE as it can be used to develop students' cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and inter-communication skills as learners are preparing

themselves to become managers/leaders as is the case in the current study. The aim is for future managers/leaders to hopefully internationalize their organisations, facilitating employability and competitiveness. The world can be envisioned as a diverse ensemble of cultures and languages. Viewing the world in such a manner can support companies as it promotes innovation and the consideration of various approaches for everyday challenges and simultaneously cause issues when organisations try to establish new ventures in foreign markets.

Although the present study was a small-scale case study limited in time and space and involved only 35 students in a specific business school, this implementation may be useful for educators who wish to investigate innovative strategies to help students develop their cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication skills while increasing their engagement and motivation. SG are now increasingly used in HE as lecturers try to develop students' intercultural and cross-linguistic awareness after the historic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic asking learners to engage again in face-to-face learning. Playmobil pro seems to be able to achieve a significant impact on students' motivation to learn and overall engagement in resolving intercultural and cross-linguistic challenges and developing international multilingual students' valuable professional skills. According to the literature and the findings of this study, few training or teaching methods appear to engage these students as much as SGs in HE in the post-pandemic era (de Almeida, 2023). This article sets an implementation framework for using Playmobil pro, a promising game-based technique, to enhance students' competencies in terms of cross-cultural and cross-lingual conflict management in the context of HE and develop their intercultural awareness fostering tolerance, trust, and inclusion for all students, irrespective of their linguistic or cultural background. Therefore, it prepares the global citizens of tomorrow who need to prioritise cultural and emotional intelligence over general intelligence.

International students' experience in this case study supports the view that Playmobil pro can have a positive impact on the development of students' intercultural and cross-linguistic communication as it offers psychological safety and ensures collaboration. The outcomes of this study reveal that Playmobil pro can inspire creative confidence (Dijks, 2018) and have a worthwhile effect on several areas relating to positive team dynamics and group mindset shifts including empathy, trust, perspective-taking, and the presence of a risk-free environment that promotes content and language learning.

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