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Social and Interactive Language Exchange: A Reciprocal English-Arabic Learning Model for Educators and Administrators at an Educational Institution in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

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Abstract. In multilingual professional environments, reciprocal language exchange initiatives can reduce communication barriers, foster collegial collaboration, and enhance intercultural competence. This study introduced the Social and Interactive Language Exchange (SAILE) model, a workplace-based approach that integrates WhatsApp-facilitated vocabulary sharing with informal face-to-face oral sessions. Introduced at an education institution in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the program engaged 25 Arabic- and English-speaking educators over 12 weeks. Unlike prior tandem studies that primarily focus on students, this research situated language exchange within a professional context, addressing Arabic speakers' need for English proficiency (particularly preparation for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS)) and English speakers' desire to acquire functional Arabic for workplace integration. Guided by Rhizomatic Learning and Sociocultural Theory, the study employed a mixed-methods design combining pre- and post-tests, questionnaires, observation notes, and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that informal exchanges promote vocabulary acquisition, motivation, and intercultural rapport, though challenges such as dialectal variation, foundational literacy in Arabic, and time constraints persisted. Based on these findings, the study recommends that UAE educational institutions integrate reciprocal language exchange initiatives within staff development frameworks, provide targeted support for Arabic literacy and dialect awareness, and formally recognize participation through professional development pathways. The study also highlights the need for future research in the UAE context, particularly through longitudinal and large-scale investigations examining the sustainability and institutional impact of workplace-based language exchange programs. This research extends tandem learning literature into professional settings and offers context-sensitive guidance for educators, institutional leaders, and policymakers.

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1. Introduction

In today's globalized and linguistically diverse workplaces, effective communication requires not only professional expertise but also intercultural understanding and multilingual competence. This is particularly true in the Gulf region, and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) specifically, where English-speaking educators and administrators work closely with Arabic-speaking colleagues. Such diversity creates opportunities for collaboration, improves relationships and enhances productivity (Fasae, 2024), but it also produces linguistic asymmetries that can hinder operations, professional growth, and social integration.

While formal language training programs are available, their rigid structures often fail to meet the practical and immediate needs of workplace communication. In contrast, informal reciprocal exchanges can provide flexible, peer-driven alternatives that are closely aligned with professional realities. For example, Arabic speakers often require English support to prepare for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and professional communication, while English speakers benefit from acquiring Arabic to help them adapt culturally and integrate in the workplace.

Tandem learning, traditionally defined as two individuals supporting each other's language development (Calvert, 1992, 1999), has been widely applied in educational contexts. However, recent scholarship stresses that successful exchanges demand more than simple pairing; they require authentic, task-based interaction that fosters engagement (Elo & Pörn, 2018; Paredes Sánchez, 2024). Studies also demonstrate that learners respond more positively to feedback and idiomatic expressions when communication reflects real-life contexts (Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2021). Digital platforms such as WhatsApp have further expanded the possibilities in this area, enabling constant, informal interaction that enhances autonomy and motivation (Chandler, 2025; Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2021).

Despite the aforementioned progress, a clear research gap remains most tandem studies focus on students or academic partnerships, with limited exploration of workplace-based reciprocal exchanges, especially in multilingual Gulf institutions. This study addresses that gap by introducing the Social and Interactive Language Exchange (SAILE) model, which combines WhatsApp-based vocabulary sharing with in-person sessions between educators and administrators in the UAE. Unlike prior work, SAILE embeds language learning directly into professional contexts, promoting not only linguistic development but also collegiality and intercultural understanding.

Guided by Rhizomatic Learning and Sociocultural Theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 2014; Khine, 2023; Vygotsky, 1978), this research investigates how reciprocal English-Arabic language exchanges affect participants' linguistic growth, motivation, and workplace communication. By highlighting both the opportunities and challenges, the study contributes to the emerging body of literature on informal workplace learning and offers practical implications for institutional policy, human resources (HR) development, and multilingual collaboration.

2. Literature Review

There has been increasingly scholarly attention paid to the intersection of language learning, workplace communication, and intercultural competence in recent years, reflecting the linguistic diversity of contemporary professional environments. For instance, informal, reciprocal language exchanges, variously described as “tandem learning” or “peer-mediated learning”, have gained traction as flexible alternatives to formal instruction, particularly in multilingual workplaces where time efficiency and contextual relevance are critical (Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Batardiè & Jeanneau, 2015). The subsequent sections in this paper provide further evidence to support these approaches.

2.1 Workplace-based Language Learning

Research demonstrates that multilingual workplaces benefit from grassroots, peer-led communication strategies rather than relying solely on top-down language policies. Angouri and Miglbauer (2014) have demonstrated that multilingual exchanges enhance collaboration and foster inclusivity. More recently, Arum (2024) conceptualized language learning as a form of workplace capital, arguing that linguistic competence shapes both professional identity and career advancement. Leadership and management research also emphasizes the value of integrating cognitive, humanistic, and social constructivist holistic learning approaches, to build competencies (Allen et al., 2022). Taken together, these studies suggest that workplace-based language initiatives must extend beyond grammar-focused training to reflect the social and professional realities experienced by employees.

2.2 Technology-mediated Language Exchange

Digital tools have transformed opportunities for reciprocal language learning. Achilleos and Jarvis (2013) highlight how mobile-assisted language use (MALU) supports informal engagement, while Chandler (2025) demonstrates that WhatsApp enables sustained peer interaction and autonomy. From an interactionist perspective, computer-mediated communication can replicate the essential features of face-to-face exchanges, including negotiation for meaning (Ziegler et al., 2022). Yet studies also caution that digital tools alone are insufficient; without structured peer support, engagement can decline over time (Woodin, 2019). The SAILE model builds on this evidence, using WhatsApp as a scaffold for reciprocal vocabulary sharing while reinforcing learning through workplace-based oral practice.

2.3 Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Professional Development

Original studies on SLA theories (Krashen, 1976) emphasize the role of authentic, socially embedded interaction. Similarly, Communicative Language Teaching (Knowles, 1973) and Interactionist Theory (Long, 1996) both highlight the fact that negotiation for meaning accelerates acquisition. More recent work reinforces these principles: Alharbi (2023) stresses the importance of examining how different types of interaction shape learning, while Aderibigbe et al. (2023) have demonstrated the value of informal exchanges in documenting workplace learning. These findings have affirmed that socially embedded approaches are more effective than rigid, classroom-based training in addressing the immediate needs of professionals.

To conclude, many workplace language programs have traditionally relied on formal training sessions. However, such approaches often fall short in terms of addressing employees' immediate and practical linguistic needs. Studies have indicated that rigid, top-down training structures often lack the flexibility to accommodate varying proficiency levels, diverse communication demands, and the realities of interactions in intercultural workplaces (Angouri, 2014).

In contrast, informal language exchanges have emerged as a more adaptive and responsive alternative, capable of facilitating spontaneous, authentic conversations that better mirror real-world professional communication (Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Cruz, 2023). Recent research indicates that informal exchanges not only heighten learner motivation but also enable language skills to be applied in real time, strengthen interpersonal relationships among colleagues, and reduce linguistic anxiety associated with formal assessments (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2021).

Furthermore, informal learning environments encourage learners to take ownership of their language development, promoting greater autonomy, engagement, and long-term retention of skills (Benson, 2013; Ushioda, 2000). These findings reinforce the value of socially driven, contextually embedded approaches to language learning, underscoring the need for workplace initiatives that are flexible, learner-centered, and reflective of the communicative realities faced by employees.

3. Theoretical Frameworks: Rhizomatic and Sociocultural Learning

This study was anchored in Rhizomatic Learning Theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 2014; Khine, 2023) and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Rhizomatic Learning positions knowledge as nonlinear and learner-driven, while Sociocultural Theory emphasizes peer scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

This bidirectional scaffolding not only acts as a method of language acquisition but also a means of building professional rapport and mutual respect. It fosters an inclusive learning community where participants alternate between being learners and facilitators. This dynamic is aligned with both Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and Brammerts' (1996) principle that learners need to do as much for their

learning partners as they themselves expect in return. As learners move through the process of collaborative practice, their autonomy grows; they become increasingly interdependent and responsible, not only for their own learning but also for their partner's, reflecting the reciprocal spirit central to tandem learning (Cruz, 2023). The SAILE model operationalizes these frameworks by enabling participants to co-construct meaning, support each other reciprocally, and adapt to dialectal differences and varying proficiency levels. The metaphor of a sailing vessel is used to illustrate the principles of reciprocity, adaptability, and collaboration that guide the exchange.

3.1 Conceptual Metaphor: SAILE as a Sailing Vessel

To visualize these theoretical underpinnings, the current study uses the metaphor of a sailing boat: progress in language exchange, like movement in sailing, requires balanced contributions, constant adjustments, and collaboration to navigate challenges. This metaphor encapsulates key concepts from both theories: adaptability (rhizomatic learning) and reciprocal support (sociocultural learning).



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for SAILE

The conceptual framework of the SAILE model, developed in this study, is structured around five guiding principles. These are given below:

1. **Mutual Efforts for Forward Movement:** Both participants must actively contribute to maintain balance and progress.
2. **Adjusting to Changing Conditions:** Learners must adapt to each other's pace, proficiency, and communication styles.
3. **Reciprocity and Balance:** Effective exchanges require equal contributions from both partners.
4. **Navigating Challenges Together:** Collaboration is essential to overcoming difficulties such as misunderstandings or language barriers.
5. **A Journey, Not Just a Destination:** The learning process itself, rather than simply reaching a language goal, is of primary importance.

By grounding the SAILE model in these guiding principles, the study positions language learning as a fluid, socially mediated journey, shaped as much by interpersonal dynamics and contextual realities as by vocabulary lists and grammar exercises.

3.2. Research Gap and Rationale

While much of the existing research on tandem and language exchange has focused on student populations (Cruz, 2023; Elo & Pörn, 2018), academic partnerships (Ziegler et al., 2022), and app-based tandem learning projects (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2021; Wardak, 2021), limited attention has been paid to informal, reciprocal language programs situated within professional, multilingual workplaces, particularly in complex sociolinguistic environments like the UAE (Aderibigbe et al., 2023). Traditional language training often fails to meet the immediate, context-specific communication needs of employees in such settings. As organizations become increasingly multilingual, there is a growing need for context-sensitive, peer-led approaches to professional language development that extend beyond conventional classroom instruction (Alharbi, 2023).

This study addresses this significant research gap by investigating how peer-led, informal exchanges grounded in authentic workplace realities can foster linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, and professional cohesion among educators and administrators. By examining the lived experiences of participants engaged in reciprocal language learning through the SAILE model, the study offers new insights into how socially driven, learner-centered exchanges can serve as powerful tools for enhancing communication, collaboration, and intercultural understanding in diverse professional environments. Furthermore, the study contributes to the evolving body of knowledge that emphasizes authentic interaction, learner autonomy, and intrinsic motivation as critical drivers of adult language acquisition (Allen et al., 2022; Ushioda, 2000). Grounded in Rhizomatic Learning and Sociocultural Theory, this research advances both theoretical and practical understanding of informal language exchange programs and offers practical implications for workplace training and intercultural collaboration.

3.3. Research Questions

Guided by the theoretical frameworks and rationale outlined above, this study sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent did participants perceive a need to learn and exchange English and Arabic through the reciprocal language exchange initiative?

RQ2: To what extent did participants demonstrate a willingness to participate in the language exchange, and what improvements did they achieve in their language proficiency?

RQ3: How does using the SAILE model contribute to the enhancement of professional language competencies among educators and administrators?

RQ4: What benefits and obstacles do English- and Arabic-speaking educators and administrators identify when using the SAILE model?

4. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods case study design, grounded in the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches to develop a comprehensive understanding of informal, workplace-based reciprocal language exchange. Mixed-methods research is premised on the assumption that combining numerical data with rich qualitative evidence enables researchers to capture both the measurable outcomes of an intervention and the processes, perceptions, and contextual factors underlying those outcomes. In the present study, this approach was particularly appropriate given the exploratory nature of the SAILE model and its implementation within a real-world professional setting.

Quantitative data was used to assess changes in vocabulary knowledge and participant perceptions through pre- and post-tests and structured questionnaires. This allowed patterns and trends in learning outcomes to be identified. Qualitative data, collected through observation notes, open-ended questionnaire responses, and WhatsApp interaction logs, provided contextualized insights into participant engagement, interaction dynamics, and perceived challenges. The concurrent use of both data strands facilitated triangulation, enhancing the credibility and robustness of the findings by enabling cross-validation across multiple sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). By integrating these complementary forms of evidence, the mixed-methods design supported a nuanced interpretation of how and why reciprocal language exchange influences learning, motivation, and intercultural interaction in the workplace.

4.1 Research Design

Given the exploratory focus and small-scale workplace context, this study did not employ advanced statistical modelling techniques. Instead, descriptive statistics were used to highlight trends in vocabulary gains. Meanwhile, the extent of the perceived need for reciprocal language exchange was examined through questionnaire responses and supported by qualitative feedback. The qualitative case study design was selected for its strength in capturing complex, real-life phenomena within their natural context (Sanjani, 2020).

4.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institution's internal review board prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured through written forms. Participants were assured of confidentiality, the right to

withdraw at any time, and secure data handling. Anonymity was maintained throughout the reporting process.

4.3 Participant Selection

The study involved 25 voluntary participants: 13 Arabic-speaking teachers/administrators and 12 English-speaking educators from a multilingual higher education institution in the UAE. Participants were selected using a non-probability convenience sampling approach, supplemented by volunteer self-selection. They were recruited through internal announcements and word of mouth. Inclusion was based on institutional affiliation and willingness to participate. This sampling approach was appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and the practical constraints of a workplace-based educational context. As a non-probability sample, the findings are not intended to be generalizable beyond the study context.

The group represented diverse demographics: the Arabic speakers (7 women, 6 men) were predominantly from the UAE, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, while the English speakers (7 women, 5 men) were primarily from Europe, North America, and South Africa. Selection criteria included institutional affiliation, first-language background (Arabic or English), willingness to participate, and a clearly identified need to develop the target language for academic, workplace, or integration purposes. Arabic-speaking participants aimed to improve their English for IELTS and workplace communication, while English speakers sought functional Arabic for integration. Most English speakers began with no prior Arabic knowledge; this required them to attain literacy in the alphabet before progressing to vocabulary learning.

4.3.1 Potential Bias

Because participation was voluntary, the sample may reflect self-selection bias, favoring more motivated or linguistically inclined individuals. While this limits the study's generalizability, it aligns with its purpose of exploring how intrinsic motivation influences informal language learning in professional contexts.

4.4 Program Structure

The SAILE program was implemented as a 12-week instructional intervention. Participants received daily vocabulary lessons via WhatsApp (5–6 items per day, excluding weekends). Vocabulary items were selected thematically and contextually, based on their relevance to participants' workplace communication needs and everyday interactions, with particular emphasis on academic, institutional, and social settings. Selection was informed by instructors' professional judgment and participants' expressed needs rather than strict frequency lists. Each item was supported with definitions, example sentences, audio recordings, and visual prompts to facilitate multimodal learning. Arabic-speaking participants received English vocabulary from an English language instructor, while English-speaking participants received Arabic vocabulary from an Arabic language instructor, maintaining the reciprocal design of the program.

4.5 Data Collection Instruments

Four data collection instruments were employed to capture both learning outcomes and participant perceptions.

1. **Pre- and post-tests** were administered to assess participants' vocabulary acquisition over the duration of the intervention. The tests consisted of targeted vocabulary items drawn from the instructional content and were designed to measure receptive and productive knowledge through short-answer and recognition-based tasks.
2. **Questionnaires**, administered via Microsoft Forms at the end of the program, were used to collect participants' perceptions of the reciprocal language exchange, perceived learning benefits, challenges encountered, and suggestions for improvement. The questionnaire included a combination of closed-ended items (Likert-scale responses) and open-ended questions.
3. **Observation notes** were maintained by the instructors throughout the intervention to document informal interactions, levels of engagement, and instances of oral language use during exchanges. These notes provided contextual insights into participant behavior and engagement patterns.
4. **WhatsApp activity logs** were used to record participation frequency, message exchanges, and engagement trends within the learning groups. These logs served as an additional indicator of learner involvement and sustained participation throughout the intervention period.

Together, these instruments enabled methodological triangulation by combining quantitative indicators with qualitative insights.

4.6 Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data (open-ended responses, observation notes, informal feedback) were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis: (1) familiarization, (2) coding, (3) theme identification, (4) theme review, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) reporting.

An inductive approach was used, allowing themes to emerge organically. Peer debriefing with two independent researchers enhanced the credibility and dependability of the data. Transferability was addressed through the provision of rich contextual descriptions of the institutional setting, participant characteristics, and intervention procedures, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings for comparable contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Cross-group comparisons between Arabic- and English-speaking participants were conducted to identify both shared and distinct experiences.

4.6.1 Emergent Themes:

- **Motivation and Learner Autonomy:** Participants' sustained engagement was strongly influenced by intrinsic motivation, with learners demonstrating increased autonomy in managing their language learning beyond scheduled activities.
- **Cultural Awareness and Collegial Relationships:** Participants reported enhanced cultural awareness and improved collegial relationships, indicating that the reciprocal language exchange contributed positively to workplace interaction and social integration.

- **Linguistic Challenges:** Recurring linguistic challenges included difficulties with script literacy, pronunciation, and exposure to dialectal variation, particularly among beginner-level learners.
- **Time and Workload Constraints:** Levels of engagement varied in response to competing professional responsibilities, with time limitations and workload pressures frequently cited as barriers to consistent participation.
- **Role of Technology in Learning:** The use of WhatsApp was widely perceived as accessible and effective for facilitating daily language exchange; however, some participants expressed a preference for more structured or synchronous interaction to complement the platform.

5. Results

The findings demonstrated that the SAILE model enhanced participants' linguistic competence, intercultural awareness, and professional collaboration, despite challenges relating to the varying proficiency and time pressures for participants. Results were derived for four key areas: language proficiency gains, participant perceptions, observed interaction patterns, and comparative group outcomes.

5.1 Language Proficiency Gains

Pre- and post-test comparisons indicated that both groups experienced substantial vocabulary growth. Arabic-speaking participants increased their English vocabulary identification accuracy from approximately 40% to 80%, while English-speaking participants improved from 10% to 45% in recognizing Arabic vocabulary. Although English-speaking participants progressed at a slower rate, likely due to script and phonological challenges, both groups demonstrated clear and meaningful gains over the intervention period. Figure 1 illustrates these trends, highlighting that while learning Arabic involved foundational challenges, the reciprocal exchange supported observable vocabulary development for both cohorts.

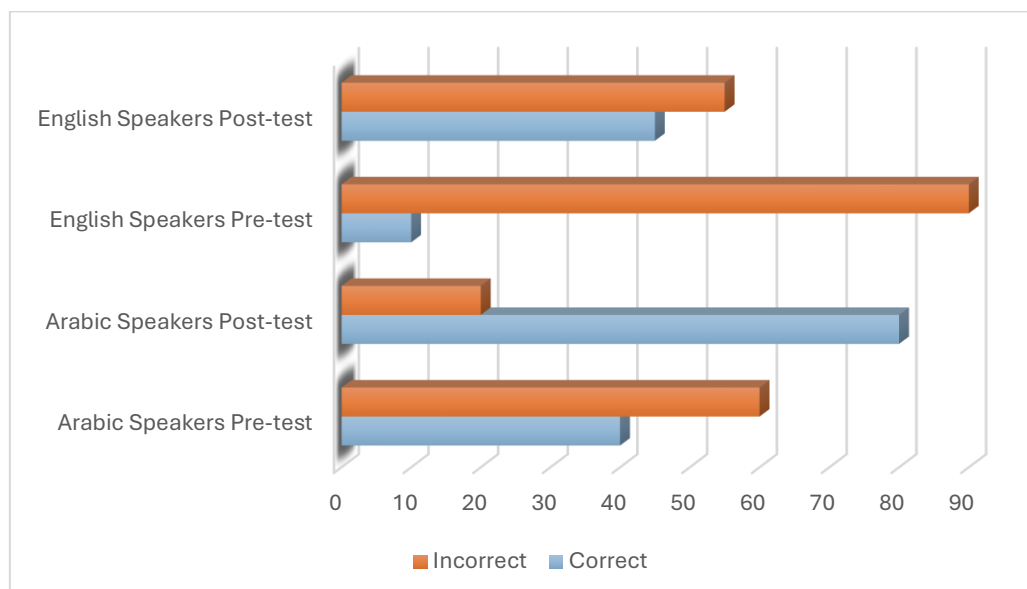


Figure 1: Pre- and post-test vocabulary performance of English- and Arabic-speaking participants

5.2 Participant Feedback and Perceptions

The questionnaire responses indicated high satisfaction with the program. Among the English speakers, 9 out of 12 were satisfied, though 8 found Arabic vocabulary “very difficult”. In contrast, 11 out of 13 of the Arabic speakers expressed satisfaction and greater ease with English vocabulary. Both groups highlighted the usefulness of oral sessions, with Arabic speakers especially valuing their relevance for IELTS preparation.

Table 1: Comparative summary of participant feedback across key engagement categories (Questionnaires)

Category	English Speakers Learning Arabic	Arabic Speakers Learning English
Satisfaction	Very Satisfied/Satisfied: 9/12	Very Satisfied/Satisfied: 11/13
Vocabulary Difficulty	Very Difficult: 8/12	Very Difficult: 3/13
Oral Sessions	Helpful (Agree/Strongly Agree): 8/12	Helpful: All participants
Word Quantity	Sufficient: 5/12	Sufficient: 8/13
Overall Impressions	Arabic is difficult, (objects/pronunciation). “cannot even read letters and fonts, how can I learn meaning 2/12”. Some found the program useful but noted challenges. Almost all enjoyed participating.	Very useful; learned many new words (especially IELTS). “Learned new cultures and got to know my colleagues better 7/13”. Almost everyone expressed motivation to continue.

Category	English Speakers Learning Arabic	Arabic Speakers Learning English
Suggestions	Teach Arabic letters/reading first, then teach meanings of the new words.	Pair learners with language partners for better interaction and support and the ability to understand each other's needs and language levels better.

Table 1 summarizes participants' perceptions, while Figure 2 visually depicts their satisfaction levels and the extent to which they found vocabulary difficult. Suggestions included introducing Arabic literacy training before vocabulary and pairing participants more consistently for individualized support.

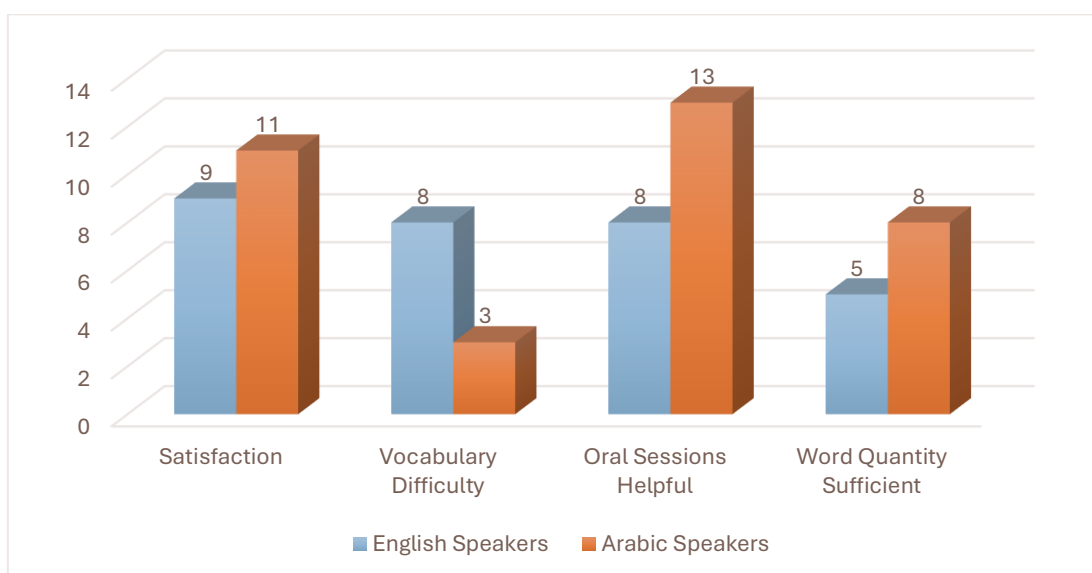


Figure 2: Participant satisfaction ratings and perceived difficulty with vocabulary following the program (N = 25)

5.3 Observational Themes and Interaction Patterns

Thematic analysis of observation notes and WhatsApp interaction logs revealed four dominant and interrelated themes relating to: participant engagement, communication challenges, and the broader impact of the reciprocal language exchange.

5.3.1 Reciprocal Motivation and Mutual Accountability

Observations indicated that participant engagement was strongly influenced by reciprocal motivation, with sustained participation occurring when both partners demonstrated comparable levels of commitment. Mutual encouragement, humor, and positive reinforcement played a central role in maintaining learners' momentum, particularly during periods of high workload.

The field notes frequently record instances where participants explicitly acknowledged each other's efforts, reinforcing a sense of shared responsibility:

“Both participants responded daily and often used humor to motivate each other. One participant commented, ‘I won’t miss today’s words – you’re counting on me,’ which prompted continued engagement.” (Observation notes, Week 4)

Conversely, when one partner became less active, engagement often declined on both sides, highlighting the interdependent nature of the exchange. This finding underscores the importance of reciprocity as a motivational mechanism within peer-based language learning models.

5.3.2 *Technology as a Facilitator of Daily Language Engagement*

WhatsApp functioned as a key enabling tool that supported the seamless integration of language learning into participants’ daily routines. Observation notes indicate that features such as voice notes, emoji reactions, and message replies enhanced clarity, accountability, and immediacy.

For example, audio recordings were frequently used to model pronunciation and reduce ambiguity:

“After receiving a vocabulary item, the English-speaking participant sent a voice note practicing pronunciation. The Arabic-speaking partner replied with corrective feedback and encouragement.” (Observation notes, Week 6)

Reaction icons (e.g., thumbs-up, check marks) were also used as informal indicators of task completion, reinforcing consistency without creating pressure. However, some observations noted that asynchronous interaction occasionally limited deeper conversational practice, suggesting the need for complementary structured sessions.

5.3.3 *Dialectal and Linguistic Challenges*

Dialectal variation emerged as a persistent challenge, particularly for English-speaking participants learning Arabic. Observations revealed confusion when vocabulary differed across regional varieties (e.g., Emirati versus Egyptian usage), leading to hesitation and requests for clarification.

One note documented this clearly:

“Participant asked whether the word used was ‘Emirati Arabic, Egyptian Arabic or standard Arabic,’ expressing concern about using the ‘wrong’ form in workplace interactions.” (Observation notes, Week 6)

In contrast, Arabic-speaking participants learning English reported fewer systemic challenges, largely due to prior exposure to standardized English varieties. This asymmetry highlights the linguistic complexity faced by novice Arabic learners and reinforces the need for explicit guidance on dialectal variation within reciprocal exchange models.

5.3.4 *Impact on Workplace Relationships and Interactional Confidence*

Beyond linguistic outcomes, participation in the SAILE program had a noticeable impact on **workplace relationships and communicative confidence**. Observation

notes indicated reduced anxiety in cross-linguistic interactions and increased willingness to initiate conversations across language groups.

For instance:

“Participants greeted each other using newly learned vocabulary in staff corridors and meetings, often laughing and correcting themselves without embarrassment.” (Observation notes, Week 10)

Such interactions fostered mutual respect and empathy, as participants became more aware of the challenges involved in learning each other’s languages. This shift contributed to a more supportive and inclusive workplace culture, extending the impact of the program beyond language learning alone.

5.4 Comparative Summary of Key Outcomes

As illustrated in Table 2, Arabic speakers demonstrated stronger linguistic gains and professional confidence, while English speakers reported slower progress but higher cultural curiosity. Both groups benefited socially, though in different ways.

Table 2: Comparative language gains, cultural integration, and communication confidence according to participant group (based on research observation notes including WhatsApp)

Aspect	English Speakers	Arabic Speakers
Language Gains	Alphabet recognition, everyday vocabulary	Vocabulary, sentence structure, IELTS preparation
Cultural Integration	High cultural curiosity and engagement	Moderate increase in cultural awareness
Confidence in Communication	Gradual improvement with ongoing challenges	Noticeable improvement
Challenges	Script decoding, dialect variation	Time constraints, word overload

6. Discussion

The SAILE model demonstrates that informal, technology-supported reciprocal exchanges can be both practical and impactful in multilingual workplaces (Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Allen et al., 2022; Angouri & Miglbauer, 2014; Arum, 2024; Batardière & Jeanneau, 2015). Unlike rigid training programs, its flexible structure encouraged regular practice, risk-taking, and interpersonal connections, reframing language acquisition as a collaborative rather than intimidating process.

Beyond its linguistic advantages, bilingual proficiency within professional environments emerged as essential rather than merely beneficial. Employees proficient in both Arabic and English could streamline their workload, minimize their dependency on translations, and overcome barriers that otherwise impede task completion. Thus, workplace language exchange can be regarded not simply as an opportunity to enhance skills, but as a necessity for efficient communication, effective teamwork, and organizational cohesion. This dynamic was especially critical in bilingual institutions, where linguistic differences can significantly

disrupt collaboration and team effectiveness. The SAILE model helps alleviate these issues by positioning language not as an obstacle, but as a shared project that enhances communication, fosters cultural integration, and strengthens team cohesion.

Furthermore, for educators and professionals teaching in multilingual or foreign contexts, participation in language exchange should be transcended to a purely vocational function. Instead, it should be embraced as an enriching opportunity for cultural immersion, professional growth, and linguistic advancement. Teaching one's native language, particularly in English as a second language (ESL) environments, should be seen as a form of paid training, providing avenues to build new relationships, deepen cultural understanding, and continually refine linguistic competencies. Rather than limiting their experiences to monolingual settings, educators should actively seek to learn from their multilingual interactions with students and colleagues. In doing so, they not only enhance their own professional skills but also significantly contribute to creating inclusive, culturally responsive educational and workplace communities.

In summary, the results of this study support the view that informal, reciprocal language exchange can serve as a practical and impactful strategy for enhancing linguistic competence, intercultural sensitivity, and professional collaboration in multilingual institutions. Based on the structured reporting of the results, this section interprets the findings through the lens of the study's guiding theories and research questions. It discusses key themes such as motivation, asymmetrical learning trajectories, and linguistic challenges, particularly for English speakers learning Arabic, while explicitly addressing the research questions outlined earlier.

6.1 Alignment with Theoretical Frameworks

The results align strongly with Rhizomatic Learning, whereby participants pursue diverse, non-linear learning trajectories shaped by their individual needs. For example, some English speakers prioritized script recognition, while others focused on greetings and workplace phrases. This lack of centralized structure did not inhibit learning; rather, it fostered adaptability and autonomy, aligning with the rhizomatic emphasis on multiplicity and learner-driven knowledge construction (Khine, 2023). Simultaneously, Sociocultural Theory was evident in peer scaffolding: colleagues alternated between being the learner and facilitator, negotiating meaning through WhatsApp and in-person exchanges, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD.

6.2 Discussion of Research Questions

The following four research questions were discussed, supported by direct quotes from participants, extracted from questionnaires and observation notes. These quotes provided valuable insights and substantiated the discussions around the research questions.

6.2.1 RQ1: *To what extent did participants perceive a need to learn and exchange English and Arabic through the reciprocal language exchange initiative?*

Motivation emerged as a decisive factor in learning outcomes. Building on Ushioda's (2000) work, participants with strong intrinsic motivation (e.g., an interest in culture, building relationships) showed greater persistence and achievement. Conversely, participants motivated primarily by extrinsic goals (e.g., financial incentives for working abroad) were less committed, echoing Gardner's framework of integrative vs. instrumental motivation.

Likewise, participants acknowledged the need to adopt a positive attitude toward the target language and its speakers to enhance language acquisition and cultural integration. Simple, colloquial interactions, such as Emirati greetings like *شو حالك؟* (Shū ḥālak?) and *شو أخبارك؟* (Shū akhbārak?), supported relationship-building and workplace communication. However, motivational differences among some participants exacerbated these linguistic challenges. One English-speaking participant openly admitted her intrinsic motivation for working in the UAE was purely financial, stating, *"I am here to make money and save, something I cannot do back home"*, thus displaying limited enthusiasm for language and cultural immersion. Conversely, another English-speaking participant demonstrated remarkable enthusiasm, regarding life in the UAE as an opportunity for profound personal and professional transformation. Engaged to an Arabic speaker and maintaining friendships with Arabic speakers beyond her professional environment, she emphasized that successful integration and survival, whether in professional or personal domains, hinge fundamentally on linguistic competence.

Reflecting on informal staffroom discussions, she stressed the parallel between professional and personal language learning, arguing that linguistic skills developed at work are essential for effectively navigating everyday workplace interactions and cultivating strong collegial bonds. She insightfully concluded: *"Remember all the promises, commitments and confident assurances you made during your interview for this job; and now you are offering excuses and saying you cannot do this and that?"* This perspective resonates with sociocultural theories of language learning, which emphasize that language development is embedded in social participation and identity negotiation rather than isolated classroom practice (Vygotsky, 1978). Consistent with prior studies in workplace language learning contexts, the findings suggest that sustained engagement, positive attitudes, and social investment significantly mediate both linguistic development and intercultural integration (Yulian & Nafisah, 2025).

These contrasting perspectives underscored the need to position teaching roles abroad, especially within ESL contexts, not simply as financial opportunities but as meaningful professional development experiences that facilitate genuine language immersion, cultural appreciation, and interpersonal connections (Duff, 2007; Duff & Yamamoto, 2025). Educators resistant to cultural and linguistic engagement might find greater professional alignment teaching in monolingual environments where linguistic proficiency in the instructional language has already been established, such as schools in English-speaking countries like the UK or US.

To address the motivational and attitudinal barriers effectively, this study recommended explicitly associating participation in reciprocal language exchanges with tangible career-advancement opportunities. Integrating language-exchange initiatives into mandatory community service and extracurricular activities within educational institutions could significantly elevate the perceived value of such programs. Furthermore, given the dialectal challenges identified, future iterations of SAILE should include dialect awareness training through resources such as audio materials, dialect labels, or peer-led clarification sessions. Such adjustments could enhance participants' linguistic competence, foster greater cross-cultural understanding, and ultimately lead to higher satisfaction and overall improvements in language proficiency.

6.2.2 RQ2: To what extent did participants demonstrate a willingness to participate in the language exchange, and what improvements did they achieve in their language proficiency?

The participant feedback and test results confirmed that willingness to engage played a significant role in language-proficiency outcomes. Arabic-speaking participants, motivated by clear goals such as preparing for the IELTS, showed strong commitment and greater improvements in terms of vocabulary acquisition. This finding is consistent with prior research highlighting the role of instrumental motivation and academic goal motives in sustaining engagement and accelerating language development (Pasban & Haddad Narafshan, 2020). English-speaking participants demonstrated varying degrees of willingness to participate, often influenced by challenges related to the Arabic script, pronunciation, and dialectal diversity.

Despite these hurdles, participants who approached the exchange with enthusiasm and openness made tangible progress in foundational skills. Active engagement correlated strongly with language gains. Participants emphasized the importance of building confidence through real interactions rather than relying solely on formal instruction, supporting the SAILE model's emphasis on informal, socially situated learning. The participants' reflections reinforced the quantitative finding that self-motivation, reciprocal effort, and positive attitudes toward cultural immersion significantly influenced the extent of language gains achieved within the program.

6.2.3 RQ3: How does using the SAILE model contribute to the enhancement of professional language competencies among educators and administrators?

The SAILE model clearly enhanced participants' professional language competencies by fostering reciprocal language exchange and significantly improving communication skills among almost all the educators and administrators involved. This approach nurtured mutual respect and appreciation for both Arabic and English, positively influencing professional interactions and institutional culture. Integrating both languages into professional development sessions and routine interactions encouraged greater inclusivity, reducing disengagement during monolingual presentations. One participant notably remarked, "You don't need to be on your phone scrolling during presentations, just because you do not understand the language. If you cannot then use your translator and pay attention". This emphasizes the expectation and importance of active

participation, even in the face of linguistic barriers. It also aimed to minimize instances where non-Arabic speakers might avoid tasks by claiming that they couldn't do them due to language limitations. Instead, the method encourages individuals to utilize translation tools and proactively collaborate with colleagues to bridge communication gaps effectively.

Moreover, many Arabic-speaking participants took pride in actively demonstrating their improved language skills, engaging confidently in English during discussions. This reciprocal enhancement extended to some non-Arabic-speaking staff, who gained foundational Arabic skills enabling them to better comprehend essential workplace communications such as signs and official announcements. Consequently, workplace communication efficiency significantly improved, benefiting job performance and enriching professional relationships. The model enhanced professional competence by reducing participants' reliance on translation, fostering inclusive participation in meetings, and encouraging mutual respect.

For Arabic speakers, improved English enabled their more active engagement in academic and administrative tasks. For English speakers, basic Arabic promoted cultural empathy and workplace rapport, even if proficiency gains were modest. This supports Angouri and Miglbauer's (2014) finding that multilingual collaboration strengthens institutional cohesion.

6.2.4 RQ4: What benefits and obstacles do English- and Arabic-speaking educators and administrators identify when using the SAILE model?

Participation in SAILE offered educators and administrators numerous benefits alongside several notable obstacles. Participants highlighted the significant benefit of fostering positive attitudes toward language learning. Even participants initially lacking aptitude could inspire colleagues through their willingness and enthusiasm, cultivating a supportive and motivating learning environment.

In addition to enhancing participants' linguistic skills, SAILE provided meaningful cultural exchanges, which participants deemed integral to the learning process. Participants emphasized the importance of sharing values, cultural practices, and histories, stating that understanding each other's backgrounds and experiences significantly boosted motivation and engagement. However, participants also encountered substantial challenges, especially English speakers learning Arabic. The primary difficulty arose from navigating the diverse Arabic dialects, which differ considerably from Modern Standard Arabic and from each other.

Common phrases such as "Kaif Halak" in standard Arabic used for "How are you?" has alternative forms in other dialects: "Ezayak" (Egyptian), "Shlonak" (Iraqi/Kuwaiti), "Kaifak" (Jordanian/Levantine), "Amil Shino" (Sudanese), and "Shū akhbārak" (Emirati). This kind of discrepancy caused confusion and frustration, intensifying cognitive load and slowing conversational proficiency. One participant candidly stated, "I wish they spoke the same Arabic, but I think even the Arabic speakers sometimes don't understand each other." Additionally, the English-speaking participants also faced significant hurdles in mastering Arabic literacy

skills, including letter recognition, pronunciation, and foundational reading, contrasting sharply with the quicker progress of Arabic-speaking learners. An English-speaking participant remarked on this disparity: *“They are progressing more and we are still stuck at shuwaya shuwaya.”*

While Arabic speakers advanced steadily in English, English speakers reported significant hurdles in acquiring Arabic literacy and managing dialectal variation. These findings echo Woodin’s (2019) caution that informal learning may falter without structural scaffolds. To address this, future SAILE iterations should include basic literacy modules and dialect-awareness activities, helping participants navigate variation without discouragement.

6.2.3 Practical Implications

Beyond its pedagogical value, the SAILE model offers several important implications for organizational practice and higher education policy, particularly within multilingual and multicultural institutional contexts such as the UAE.

At the organizational and human resources level, the findings suggest that reciprocal language exchange initiatives should be formally integrated into ongoing staff development and professional learning programs. Rather than treating language learning as an optional or peripheral activity, HR managers can position initiatives such as SAILE as part of structured induction, continuous professional development (CPD), or intercultural competence training. Embedding reciprocal language exchange within staff development frameworks may enhance employee engagement, facilitate smoother workplace communication, and support staff retention by fostering a sense of inclusion and mutual respect among linguistically diverse employees.

At the institutional leadership level, the study highlights the importance of incentivizing participation to address motivational and workload-related barriers. Institutional leaders may consider systems to formally or informally recognize participation in language-exchange initiatives through workload allocation, professional development credits, or formal acknowledgment in annual performance reviews. Such measures could legitimize participation as a valued professional activity rather than an additional burden, thereby increasing sustained engagement. Furthermore, allocating dedicated time within working hours for reciprocal language exchange may reduce attrition caused by scheduling conflicts; these emerged as a recurring challenge in the present study.

At the policy and governance level, the SAILE model has implications for higher-education policymakers and accreditation bodies operating in multilingual contexts. Institutions may embed bilingual or multilingual workplace communication frameworks into quality assurance and accreditation criteria, particularly in regions where higher-education institutions employ an internationally diverse workforce. Recognizing bilingual communication competence as an institutional quality indicator could encourage universities to adopt structured language exchange initiatives that support both staff integration and institutional cohesion. In the long term, such policies may contribute to more

inclusive academic workplaces, improved intercultural collaboration, and stronger alignment between institutional missions and sociolinguistic realities. Collectively, these implications suggest that reciprocal language exchange should be viewed not merely as a pedagogical intervention but as a strategic organizational tool that supports professional development, intercultural communication, and institutional effectiveness in multilingual higher-education environments.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that informal, reciprocal language exchange can be a transformative tool in multilingual professional environments. By combining WhatsApp-based vocabulary sharing with informal oral practice, the SAILE model facilitated measurable vocabulary gains, enhanced intercultural awareness, and strengthened collegial relationships among educators and administrators in a UAE institution. Grounded in Rhizomatic Learning and Sociocultural Theory, the model highlights the value of a method of learning that is flexible, collaborative, and embedded in real workplace contexts.

Key findings indicated that Arabic speakers made substantial gains in English proficiency, particularly for IELTS-related vocabulary. Meanwhile, English speakers, though progressing more slowly, reported higher cultural engagement and increased workplace confidence. Motivation emerged as a critical factor, with intrinsically motivated participants demonstrating stronger commitment and achievement. Challenges included dialectal variation, limited Arabic literacy among English speakers, and time constraints, suggesting that greater scaffolding is needed for balanced outcomes.

Importantly, this research contributes to the literature by extending tandem learning into the underexplored domain of professional workplace contexts in the Gulf, demonstrating that informal exchange can function not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a strategic mechanism for organizational cohesion.

8. Policy and Practice Recommendations

Building on the 13 principles of reciprocity, integrity, and decency outlined by Wardak (2024), and informed primarily by the empirical findings of the present study, this section outlines policy and practice recommendations intended to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of future implementations of the SAILE method. Although participation in the program was voluntary, observational data, participant feedback, and engagement patterns indicated that clearer structures and institutional alignment contributed positively to motivation, continuity, and learning outcomes. Accordingly, the following 12 recommendations are proposed:

1. Institutional Coordination and Support

The findings indicated that participants demonstrated higher engagement when the program was visibly supported and coordinated at the institutional level. It is therefore recommended that future SAILE initiatives be formally organized and

overseen by program coordinators to ensure consistency, visibility, and sustained participation.

2. Targeted Awareness and Promotion

The study revealed that some potential participants were unaware of the initiative until late in the program. Broader and more systematic promotion through campus communication channels may increase participation and diversify the profiles of potential learners.

3. Structured Supplementary Interaction

While daily digital exchanges were valued, participants reported that occasional structured interactions enhanced accountability and clarification. Short, scheduled sessions may therefore be incorporated to complement asynchronous communication.

4. Reinforcement of Learning Strategies

Observational notes indicated that participants who engaged in note-taking, revision, and recall retained vocabulary more effectively. Encouraging such strategies may support sustained learning, even within informal exchange contexts.

5. Recognition of Participation

The findings suggest that motivation varied among participants, particularly in relation to workload pressures. Formal recognition, such as certificates or professional development acknowledgment, may enhance participants' commitment and legitimize participation as a professional activity.

6. Personalized Pairing and Learning Pathways

Participants benefited when learning activities aligned closely with their individual goals (e.g., preparing for IELTS or workplace communication). Flexible pairing arrangements and personalized learning pathways may therefore enhance the relevance of the language acquisition and learner satisfaction.

7. Adaptation of Language Content

Variation in proficiency levels highlighted the need for adjustable frequency and complexity in relation to how often and what vocabulary is introduced. Customizable content may allow participants to progress at an appropriate pace while maintaining reciprocal balance.

8. Integration of Cultural Awareness

The study demonstrated that linguistic development was closely linked to cultural understanding. Incorporating intercultural awareness activities alongside language exchange may further support workplace integration and collegiality.

9. Social and Community-building Activities

End-of-program social activities were reported to enhance motivation and a sense of community. Such activities may contribute to retention and reinforce the collaborative ethos of reciprocal exchange.

10. Additional Linguistic Support for English-speaking Participants

English-speaking participants consistently identified Arabic script and dialectal variation as significant challenges. Introductory literacy support and dialect awareness activities may ease these initial barriers and improve confidence.

11. Alignment with Human Resources Frameworks

Given the program's positive impact on workplace communication, embedding language exchange outcomes within professional development or appraisal frameworks may align individual learning with institutional objectives.

12. Enhanced Use of Educational Technology

The study highlighted the effectiveness of multimodal digital tools, particularly audio and visual resources. Continued and expanded use of such technologies may further support flexible, autonomous learning beyond scheduled interactions.

9. Future Research Directions

Further studies should examine the scalability of the SAILE model in larger organizations, explore cross-sector applications (e.g., in healthcare and corporate settings), and investigate the effect of the model on long-term retention of language skills. Comparative studies could also assess the effectiveness of different digital platforms and the role of AI-assisted tools in augmenting informal exchanges. Finally, future research should analyze how participants navigate dialectal variation in Arabic and how this influences motivation and retention.

In sum, the SAILE model offers a blueprint for reimagining language learning not as an isolated classroom endeavor, but as an integrated part of daily professional life. As workplaces become more global and linguistically complex, such models will be increasingly vital, not only for communication, but for fostering truly inclusive, collaborative institutional cultures.

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