

Teachers' Attitudes towards Telecollaborative Perspectives in Algerian EFL Higher Education

موقف الأساتذة من مفاهيم التعاون عن بعد في التعليم العالي للغة الانجليزية كلفة
أجنبية في الجزائر

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Abstract

In recent years, telecollaboration has been proven to be of a great importance in foreign language learning and teaching, and has been a useful tool in the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence. The purpose of this paper is to investigate Algerian University teachers' willingness and perception on integrating telecollaboration in their teaching practices. In order to know their views, an online survey targeted more than 30 Algerian English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Results indicate that teachers find the idea of integrating tele-collaboration in their classrooms beneficial for students, in terms of the development of different skills and competences such as: linguistic and intercultural. Despite the positive attitude, findings also identify the challenges teachers face and prevent them from starting such projects, such as lack of technological tools, lack of time and training.

Keywords: Telecollaboration; intercultural communicative competence; teachers' perspective; survey.

ملخص البحث:

أثبت التعاون عن بعد في السنوات الأخيرة أنه ذو أهمية كبيرة في تعلم وتدرّيس اللغات الأجنبية، وأيضاً كأداة مفيدة لاكتساب كفاءة التواصل عبر الثقافات. الهدف من هذا المقال هو التحقق من استعداد وتفهم الأساتذة الجامعيين في الجزائر بشأن إدماج التعاون عن بعد في ممارساتهم التعليمية. و من أجل معرفة آرائهم، أجري استطلاع الكتروني لأكثر من 30 أستاذ جزائري للغة الانجليزية كلفة أجنبية. تشير النتائج بأن هؤلاء يجدون فكرة إدماج التعاون عن بعد في أقسامهم نافعة للطلبة خاصة في تطوير مختلف المهارات والكفاءات اللغوية والثقافية. إلا أنه وبالرغم من الموقف الايجابي، فقد حددت النتائج التحديات والعوائق التي تعترض الأساتذة والتي تمنعهم من بدء مثل هذا النوع من المشاريع كنقص المعدات التكنولوجية ونقص الوقت والتدريب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعاون عن بعد، كفاءة التواصل عبر الثقافات، مفهوم الأساتذة، استطلاع.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's global context, globalization and multiculturalism are the main characteristics of the recent world, and with the rapid developments of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, the interest in telecollaboration has increased significantly. According to Gee and Hayes (2011) people connected digitally in all parts of the world are in a way or another living next to each other, in which cross culture communication would occur.

With The emergence of 'the Communicative Approach' or 'the Communicative Language Teaching' in the 1970's, in addition to the series of research on language teaching and learning of global lingua francas for instance Spanish, French and English, led to the raise of cultural awareness and Intercultural Communication (IC). As a result of this growth, Noels, Yashima and Zhang (2012) assert that: "the potential for intercultural contact is greater than it ever been in human history." (p. 52)

The development of computerized technology plays a major role in how individuals work, live, play, entertain and more importantly it changed the way we perceive both learning and teaching in all different fields. Therefore, it offered the possibility to be embedded in the educational system.

Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) offer foreign language teachers a wide range of new tools and methods to make the learning and teaching process easier, more interactive and engaging. This new learning environment has the potential to develop students' linguistic and intercultural competencies including digital literacies.

Using these tools has led teachers from all educational levels to have internationalization learning from their home countries without the need to go abroad to have the experience. This concept of *Internationalization* is defined by Beleen and Jones (2015) as the integration of international and multicultural aspects into teaching curricula within their local learning institutions.

Teachers and students are becoming more aware of the benefits of ICTs' integration into their educational practices. Accordingly, Clifford (1998) asserts that teachers will not be replaced by computers and technologies in general, but a tech-savvy teacher will definitely replace teachers who are not willing to use ICTs in their classrooms.

With the rise of ICTs, the demands for changing teaching methods have been required, i.e. the implementation of technologies in educational processes. Bax (2003) describes this act as *ICT normalization*, in which ICTs are elements embedded

effectively in students' language learning without them being aware of its role as just technologies. This normalization can be achieved through different teaching approaches, namely telecollaboration.

Teachers are engaging their students in telecollaborative programs as a part of internationalization. Telecollaboration is a term used to refer to the integration of internet communication tools in learning and teaching practices between geographically distant classes for the purpose of developing students' language learning and intercultural communication competence.

The aim of this survey study is to explore Algerian university teachers' current practices and use of technological tools inside their classrooms and teaching habits in general. Also, assessing teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the integration of telecollaboration in their teaching practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Telecollaboration

In the context of foreign language education, the term telecollaboration, known also as 'virtual exchange' is defined by Belz (2003) as:

Internationally dispersed learners in parallel language classes use Internet communication tools such as e-mail, synchronous chat, threaded discussion, and MOOs (as well as other forms of electronically mediated

communication), in order to support social interaction, dialogue, debate, and intercultural exchange. (p. 1)

In other words, it refers to the application of digital tools that would facilitate online communication, in order to bring together different language learners from different classes in distant geographical locations through collaborative tasks and project work, to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence. Traditionally, the interaction is text-based and asynchronous (i.e. not real time). However, nowadays, thanks to recent technological tools and online communication advances, the interaction can be achieved through synchronous (i.e. real time) oral communication and multi model exchanges.

Telecollaboration is now considered as one of the main pillars in the intercultural shift to foreign language education (Thorne 2006), because it allows learners to engage in regular, (semi-)authentic communication with other members of different cultures in distant locations and also gives them the opportunity to reflect on and learn from the outcomes of this intercultural exchange within the supportive and informed context of their foreign language classroom. In the words of Kern et al. (2004), telecollaboration is a network-based learning and it offers educators the opportunity to:

... Use the Internet not so much to teach the same thing in a different

way, but rather to help students enter into a new realm of collaborative enquiry and construction of knowledge, viewing their expanding repertoire of identities and communication strategies as resources in the process. (p. 21)

Telecollaboration, as stated above, is one of the main components of intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education. It helps instructors engage their students in synchronous and asynchronous classes with others that are geographically and culturally distant. This intercultural exchange, also, allows learners to reflect on and construct new views within the context of their FL classroom.

According to Guth and Helm (2010) it is: "Generally understood to be internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence (as defined by Byram, 1997) through structured tasks." (p. 14)

2.2 Intercultural Communicative Competence

Before discussing what Intercultural Communicative Competence is, it is important to understand the notion of '*culture*'. Over the years, culture was and still is a concern or a subject of investigation of many scholars and it was a necessity to

understand what is meant by the word '*culture*'. It attracted many researchers, anthropologists, psychologists, social scientists and culture investigators in which they tried to interpret the concept into a one precise, valid, accurate and universal definition.

The concept has been dealt with in numerous papers from different disciplines, under several definitions and conceptualizations, which make it difficult to have a clear cut definition of the term culture. To certify this state Stern (1992) argued that:" the concept of culture is notoriously difficult to define" (p.207). In other words, the term culture is without doubt broad and inclusive to various dimensions.

Damen (1987) points out that: "Culture is a universal fact of human life." (p. 88), in other words, culture is deeply embedded in our way of being, it is everything around us, anything we think about, say or do. There is no specific or a single definition of the term; it is rather a vague and broad concept that covers an open range of dimensions and aspects of peoples' life. In this regard, Byram (1989) clarifies that it is an omnibus concept.

According to Dodd (1995): "Culture influences communication, beyond using language, the study of intercultural communication recognizes how culture pervades what we are, how we act, how we think, and how we talk and listen." (p. 3) In other words, culture is not only about the social context but

rather it shapes the way we interact and behave.

Samovar, Porter and Jain (1981) claim that:

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted...Culture is the foundation of communication. (p.3)

It is widely known that language and culture are correlative terms, and the relationship is indispensable, whenever communication is occurring between a group of people who speaks two or more languages, culture is represented within. Gunderson (2000) depicts the relation between the two terms as:

Language and culture are inextricably linked. Unlike the Gordian knot, nothing comes from separating them because they have little or no meaning apart from each other. And English has become a world language, one that dominates business and science. In many respects it is hegemonic. To participate in the world economy and to benefit from the advances of science, it is

believed, one must know English. (p.694)

Researchers argued that in order for communication to be achieved within EFL learners, ICC is a necessity. Hymes (1972) asserted that learning a second language does not only require the knowledge of grammatical rules, but to also know the use of this language in its cultural context. ICC is the ability for EFL learners to communicate effectively with others on both a linguistic and cultural level.

The most fundamental definition of the concept is given by Byram (1997), he defined ICC as: “the ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries” (p. 7). Which was later extended by Byram et al (2002) to: “the ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and the ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality” (p. 10)

3. Research Design

In this section, details of the approach, materials and procedures used for data collection and analysis are presented

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

In this paper, a mixed-method research has been employed; which refers to the combination of both quantitative and qualitative data collection. In the data analysis, the quantitative data is represented through descriptive statistics, besides an amount

of qualitative data which is mainly used to illustrate and elucidate the responses provided in the quantitative data. The open-ended questions regarding teachers' use of technologies and ideas on integrating telecollaboration in their classrooms were imported into QDA Miner Lite software and coded for recurring themes and patterns.

An online survey was conducted to gather information as they are usually a common way to collect data researches in the fields of second language. Using questionnaires is considered as one of the important tools to data gathering, as explained by Dornyei (2003): "they are easy to construct, extremely versatile, and uniquely capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processable." (p. 1)

3.2 Research Context and Participants

The focus of this paper is on Algerian University English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Surveys were delivered through emails to different EFL teachers from different Algerian universities, however, only 37 educators from 15 institutions responded to the survey. In all, the participants consisted of 23 female and 14 male teachers aged from 27 to over 50, where 17 are holding a magister degree, 19 a doctorate and 1 professor.

The number of years designating their teaching experience is laid out in Table 1. The majority of teachers have a 10 plus years of experience and the others spread broadly and differently.

3.3 Algerian Teachers' Use of ICT in General

In this part of the analysis, we focused on Algerian teachers' use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) in general. 100% of the respondents have an access to a computer and an internet connection at home, yet their use of this device each day varies, as 40.5% use their computers from 1 to 3 hours per day, 32.4% from 4 to 6 hours, 24.3% more than 6 hours a day. However, one respondent 2.7% uses the computer for less than an hour and another 2.7% never use it.

In terms of their proficiency level as technology users a list of description categories was provided for them to choose from. 48.6% of the informants classified themselves as 'average' users in which they demonstrate a general competency in a number of computer applications. 40.5% chose 'advanced' as they have acquired the ability to competently use a broad spectrum of computer technologies as shown in figure 1.

3.4 ICT and EFL Teaching

In this part, the investigation is about Algerian teachers' access of technologies in their institutions and its use in their teaching practices. 54.1% of these teachers' institutions do not promote ICT innovations, in contrast to 45.9% who do promote. However, only 10.8% of the

respondents' classrooms are connected to internet, whereas, 89.2% are not.

Most of the respondents integrated technologies in their teaching activities; even though the frequency varies as most of them 35.1% use it occasionally, except for 5 who never use it 13.5% and chose not to even if the circumstances were different or more favorable to integrate it as shown in figure 2.

Moreover, they were asked in an open-ended question to elaborate more on the tools already used inside their classrooms and the most common answers were the adoption of PowerPoint presentations through data shows, video projection and audio recordings. Some argued that these materials are not provided by their institutions, so they need to bring it themselves.

Concerning the challenges teachers face to use ICT inside classrooms, their answers showed that 81.1% of the teachers' main problem is technology access along with time 32.4%, students' interest 18.9%, language technology training 16.2% and language curriculum and/or texts used at the institution 13.5%. This further demonstrates that the real issue for teachers is the lack of technological tools provided by their institutions which prevent them from integrating ICTs.

As for teachers' opinion on whether technology increases students' achievement or not and if it enhances lifelong learning, 81.1% said yes and 18.9% answered no. 89.2% of them

agreed that the use of ICTs in their teaching practices is helpful and would improve students' communication skills as opposed to 10.8%.

3.5 Telecollaboration in EFL

Section 4 dealt with teachers' perspective on telecollaboration and intercultural communicative competence. Most respondents 81.1% were familiar with one of the terms: *Telecollaboration*, *Virtual Exchange (VE)* or *Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE)*. Although, only 32.4% of teachers have experience with it in language teaching or teacher development, in contrary to 67.6% who do not. Thus, they were asked to describe their experiences, the following quotes show that some of the teachers had collaborations with a partner from a foreign country:

R1: *I have been a member of the GVC global visual classroom with North Carolina and Moldova universities and this was within the program of intercultural speaker and cultural studies.*

R2: *I once took part in a Cultural joint-program between the University of Batna and the University of Washington DC (subventioned by the US Embassy in Algeria), in which students exchanged information for about 6 or seven sessions.*

R3: *At the secondary school telecollaboration has been applied on students of English to exchange with American native*

speakers as a new innovation in applying ICT.

R4: I am teaching Civilization and TEFL online to Brazilian and Mexican learners (businessmen and politicians). It is very interesting and learners are very motivated.

Other teachers experienced virtual exchange within the same country with their students, as illustrated by the following responses:

R5: In the Sanako virtual class which is intended for EFL learners, you can create your class, share documents, lessons, deliver exercises and evaluate each student. It also enables you to share links and videos.

R6: I used to employ this sort of tools with my online students from different parts of the world who decided to complete their degree via distance learning (Teleconference). We used to have more online students than on campus students. Students discussed their final projects via teleconference digital media and they benefit from a constant online supervision. In fact, it was a short lived experience with university students due to weak internet connections and students unreadiness. I have to add that this was done for delivering lectures online.

R7: videos of my courses are regularly sent to the students via the university e-platform.

R8: Given the present situation and since I teach oral expression, I managed to contact my students via what's up. Also, I had the opportunity to be part of a meeting held on Zoom with my colleagues to discuss Master2 dissertation titles.

Concerning intercultural communication competence (ICC) and if it is important to be developed, almost all teachers 94.6% said yes, except for 5.4%. However, when asked if the integration of telecollaboration would develop students' intercultural communicative competence only 32.4% strongly agreed to the statement, as shown in figure 3.

When asked about their own definition of ICC and its importance, all teachers focused on what their perception of positive aspects about communicating across cultures. ICC according to them is the understanding of other cultures including your own which would help you to communicate better with the others. They argue that EFL learners should know others' cultures in order to learn the language since one cannot exist without the other; you cannot acquire a language without its culture and vice versa. It facilitates the communication. They all agree that it is important because it helps in

developing students' awareness and attitudes towards the others. It would also bridge the gap between the language users while enhancing their learning process and developing their communication skills, as illustrated by the following responses:

R1: I guess it is communication between people from different cultures who speak different languages and still are able to reach mutual intelligibility thanks to their ICC. It is essential for language learning since the latter is basically a matter of knowing about the other and understanding the other. We are usually afraid of the unknown, and possessing ICC lowers our filter and makes it enjoyable for us as language learners to discover the other's culture and share with him our own culture.

R2: in this current era of Globalization, it should no longer be considered as an additional competence or skill, it should take be emphasized as a central component of the language classroom, and it should be taught as a platform to the traditional four skills.

R3: In my view, language is also a carrier of cultural norms and heritage. So effective communication then entails grasping cultural norms and conventions. Well, I see

intercultural communicative competence as the ability to engage and communicate successfully with a foreigner without having the challenge of decoding culturally charged speech acts, falling into misunderstanding, or sounding rude.

Regarding the rating of possible pedagogic aims of a telecollaboration project from the most important to the least important, most teachers 56.7% argued that developing intercultural awareness and communication skills is the most important, next, 29.7% believe that it provides authentic communication scenarios in a foreign language, followed by learning more about their subject from a foreign perspective and 13.7% of teachers agreed that the last two aims are to develop online communication and collaboration skills (digital literacy) and develop foreign language competence.

Concerning the challenges that would prevent them from integrating telecollaboration in their EFL practices, most teachers agreed that the biggest issue is the lack of technological tools in universities. Also, there is no internet connection which would facilitate collaborations. Others argued that even if above requirements are met; there will be a problem of teachers and students' training.

In terms of telecollaboration importance in EFL learning, 89.2% of teachers agreed that students would

improve their intercultural awareness and their online communication and digital literacy skills. 81.1% of them agreed it would improve their foreign language skills. However, only 67.6% of the respondents share the same idea that telecollaboration would affect students' attitudes and perspectives towards intercultural learning. Besides, it would affect their attitudes and perspectives towards EFL learning.

Finally, teachers were asked if telecollaboration reinforces stereotypes, 67.6% said no because it is going to act as a bridge between the groups and the more students break language and cultural barrier, it would help them be open-minded towards the others and develop their intercultural understanding; thus, tolerate and respect differences. However, 32.4% contend it does reinforce stereotypes though, there were no arguments defending their viewpoints.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate teachers' opinions and perceptions upon integrating telecollaboration into their teaching practices and how it can affect and enhance students' intercultural competence, as well as learning outcomes in general. This study focuses also on teachers' shared challenges that prevent them from implementing telecollaborative projects.

The findings were gathered by means of an online survey, delivered to

Algerian university teachers. It included both open-ended and closed-ended questions concerning their use of technologies along with language learning. Also, their views on the usefulness of telecollaboration, in terms of developing students' different skills and competences, mainly intercultural and linguistic.

Results indicate that Algerian university teachers are familiar and conscious about both the benefits and challenges of applying such projects in their classrooms. The findings show that participants are actually willing to integrate telecollaboration into their teaching practices, as they find it useful into developing students' English language learning skills and literacies linguistic, digital, as well as, their cultural awareness. In addition, though their answers to open-ended questions showed positive attitudes towards the integration of telecollaboration, there were some challenges they think would face.

Nevertheless, as is the case with any research study, there were some limitations to this study that should be acknowledged, namely, the size of the sample for this study, which is considered as small and this prevents the generalization of the findings. For that reason, a larger sample could be used for future research to increase its validity.

Another limitation is related to the data source. It is a possibility that participants tend to respond with what

they think is the right answer. They can also predict what the researcher wants them to answer, and they do accordingly

Appendices:

Table.1. Teaching Experience

Number of years	Count	Percentage
From 2 to 6	5	13.5%
From 7 to 10	3	8.1%
More than 10 years	29	78.4%

Note. This table demonstrates the respondents' teaching experience

Fig.1. Teachers' Proficiency Level as Technology User.

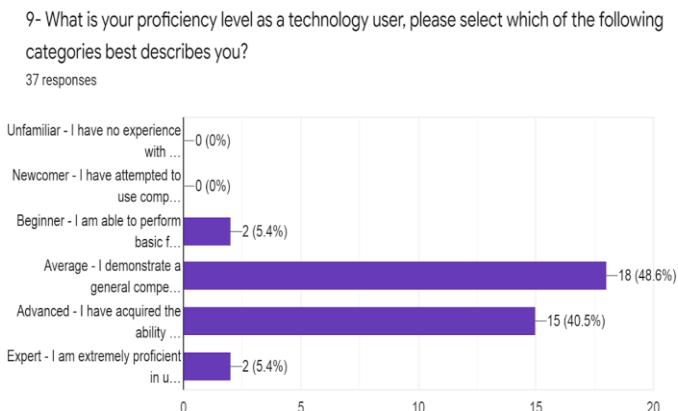


Fig.2. Teachers Integration of Technology in Their Teaching Activities.

12- Do you integrate technology in your teaching activities?
37 responses

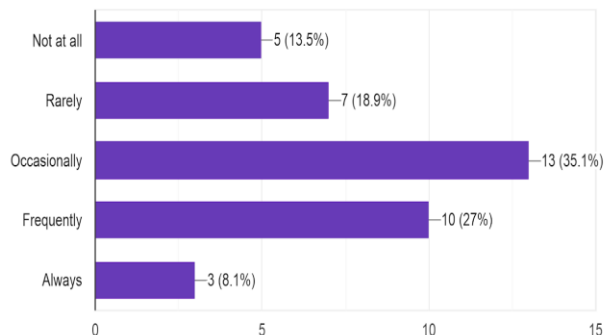
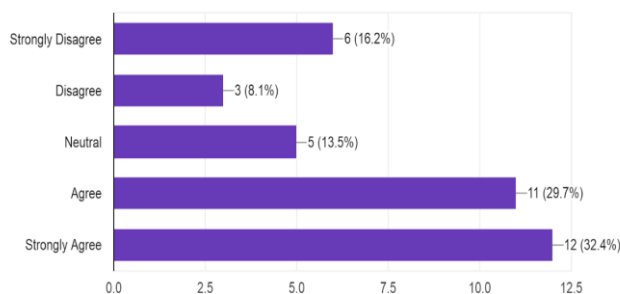


Fig.3. Teachers' Degree of Agreement on the Development of ICC with the Integration of Telecollaboration.

24- Do you think that the integration of telecollaboration would develop students' intercultural communicative competence?
37 responses



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