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Developing the Intercultural Competence of Algerian University Students through Virtual Intercultural Exchanges

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Abstract

Virtual milieus are becoming a setting for a great deal of intercultural contact. Learners engaged in virtual exchanges are likely to encounter users from different nationalities who bring with them their culturally-grounded behaviors, beliefs and expectations as to what is most appropriate for intercultural interactions. Against this background, learners need specific skills, attitudes and knowledge to establish working relationships and collaborate with distant partners, namely intercultural competence. The present paper explores the effectiveness and relevance of participating in virtual intercultural exchanges to develop Algerian University learners' intercultural competence (or lack thereof). The particular significance of this study lies in shedding light on the importance of scaling up virtual intercultural exchanges to become an expected activity in Algerian Higher education. We opted for the quasi-experimental design as an appropriate research strategy for the present study. Data were gathered from attitudinal surveys administered to 38 students enrolled at the department of English language of Abou Bakr Belkaid University, Algeria. Participants were not selected randomly. They were grouped into two groups: a focus group entailing 19 students who participated in a telecollaborative partnership offered in the fall of 2020, and a control group of 19 students who were not involved in intercultural exchange programs. This initiative attempts to present some preliminary findings to show that virtual intercultural exchanges can assist Algerian learners in developing their intercultural competence under the guidance of their instructor.

Keywords: Algerian university students, intercultural competence, intercultural education, telecollaboration, virtual intercultural exchange

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Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of a study investigating the development of Algerian University learners' intercultural competence (IC) when engaged in virtual intercultural exchanges (or lack thereof). Such partnerships contain activities designed to help students become more flexible with different others and equip them with abilities needed for effective intercultural exchanges. Currently, little is known about intercultural teaching/learning in Algerian Higher education and whether telecollaborative partnerships are likely to help students develop their intercultural abilities. The following research question guides our study to learn more about the effectiveness of online intercultural exchanges in higher education: "To what extent can Algerian University learners' intercultural competence be promoted through online intercultural exchanges?" To develop the latter, the researchers used the framework provided by Fantini (2007) to determine the effectiveness and relevance of this technological tool and activities in developing Algerian University learners' intercultural competence.

A major contribution of this research on virtual intercultural exchanges in a monolingual Algerian context, where English is used as a Foreign Language (FL), has been to add some findings to support previous studies in the same field. Furthermore, the insights from such studies have and continue to draw the attention of language instructors to integrate telecollaboration in their language classes to help university learners promote the required abilities and skills to communicate, learn and collaborate with different partners.

This research paper begins by stating the research problem, and the main aim of this study refers then to the contribution of these research findings to the field of intercultural education in Algerian Universities. Next, it reviews the concept of culture in language teaching in light of computer-mediated technology and how language learners might relocate their subject positions while interacting virtually with people from different countries and cultures. Then, it unpacks the concept of IC and its sub-dimensions. Also, it reviews previous research findings on the development of university students' IC through telecollaborative partnerships (or lack thereof). It moves to describe the research design, instruments, and procedures for data collection and analysis. Finally, it attempts to answer the research question and then discuss and interpret the findings of previous studies from the literature review section.

Literature Review

Teaching a language as a foreign or a Second Language (hence, SL) can impact on the sociolinguistic aspect of culture (Kramersch, 2013). In the FL teaching context, where there is almost no immediate and/or daily communication with native speakers unless, in virtual encounters, culture embodies a journey of discoveries on how life would look like through the eyes of target people. FL students, not least Algerians, learn about the target culture with the only aim of satisfying their curiosity about otherness; they try to adapt to it or adopt it as their own only when communicating with native speakers, either while staying in the host country (Kramersch, 2013) or virtual contexts. Yet, in the SL teaching context, culture can be subjected to debates and concerns

of living and working for immigrants; they acquire a national culture that is different from their own through schooling -as a secondary socialization process (Kramersch, 1998).

In the early 21st century, due to globalization and the rapid spread of computer-mediated technology, the ever-changing nature of the world's interconnectedness has changed the role of culture in language teaching (Risager, 2006, as cited in Kramersch, 2013).

However, the modernist perspective in which culture is researched and taught remains the same; culture is still regarded as linked to predefined social structures of particular speech communities (Kramersch, 2013). These speech communities are focalized on individuals sharing common goals –rather than common values and memories- and belonging to many communities of practice (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, as cited in Kramersch, 2013).

In their process of FL learning, language learners generally find themselves encountering other worldviews of joint activities and routines as well as different life goals, values and behaviors, thus, some applied linguists were incited to espouse a post-modernist (Giddens, 1991) or ecological approach to the teaching of culture (Kramersch & Steffensen, 2008; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). In this approach, culture has become a socially constructed discourse and is reconstructed by individuals through interactions; interlocutors from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are likely to be displacing their cultural views in the process of understanding each other. Here, much stress is put on the relationship between the self and others over multiple timescales in a decentred perspective. In a post-modernist approach, learning a foreign language does not enhance language learners to change their identity but might lead them to change their subject positions; consequently, they might locate themselves in the *third place* of discourse (Kramersch, 2009). In fact, in face-to-face or online interactions, students construct their own and their interlocutors' subject positions by asking questions about any ambiguity raised or choosing which topic to discuss or to avoid (Kramersch, 2013).

Intercultural Competence

IC remains a concept that much like culture is difficult to define. The problem lies in the multidimensionality of the construct and in the fact that many of its proposed components are abstract concepts. The most accepted definition among scholars is the one provided by Deardorff (2004) who defined it as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (p. 196).

According to Byram and Zarate (1997), the sub-components of IC are Knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values that an individual holds as an agent participating in many social groups. The foundation of IC is in the attitudes (*savoir être*) of the intercultural speaker that refer to their ability to decentre. Another crucial element is Knowledge (*savoirs*), not essential knowledge about a particular culture, but rather a knowledge of how social groups and identities operate and what is involved in intercultural communication (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002).

To see how misunderstandings can occur and they might be resolved, intercultural speakers need the attitudes of decentring as well as the skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), that is, comparing ideas, events or documents of two or more cultures and seeing how the other perspective might perceive each. Because it is mainly impossible to anticipate knowledge of all cultures, intercultural speakers need to acquire the skills of learning new knowledge and integrating it with pre-existing one; this could be facilitated by asking appropriate questions about other people's unconscious beliefs, values and behaviors which cannot be easily explained, and hence skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/ faire*). Finally, individuals' own beliefs, values and behaviors are deeply ingrained and can result in rejection; therefore, intercultural speakers need critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) of themselves and their values and those of others (Byram et al, 2002).

The Development of Intercultural Competence through Virtual Intercultural Communication

Online intercultural communication, alternatively called *virtual exchange* or *telecollaboration*, encompasses instructional practices such as collaborative tasks, collective inquiry, and opportunities for social interaction between internationally dispersed partner classes using internet communication tools (e.g., e-mail, chat, blogs, videoconferencing) without the cost of travel abroad (Helm, 2015; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). Communication in telecollaborative activities occurs synchronously or asynchronously or combined utilizing various models and instruments. These online exchanges can be seen to promote: (a) learner autonomy through increased techno-pedagogical skills, (b) foreign language development and (c) intercultural communicative competence (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). The ensuing discussion will focus on the latter competence based on reviewing some previous research findings in university class-to-class telecollaborative programs.

As mentioned above, along with promoting language skills, telecollaborative learning aims at improving learners' IC (Abrams, 2002; Belz & Thorne, 2006; Byram, 1997; Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Liaw & Bunn-Le Master, 2010; O'Dowd & Ware, 2009; Toscu & Erten, 2020). O'Dowd (2007) stressed the potential of telecollaboration in assisting learners in developing their IC as opposed to traditional teaching. When encountered with linguistically and culturally different others, learners are stimulated to reflect upon different worldviews (Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997). In a research synthesis of studies reported between 2010 and 2015, Çiftçi and Savaş (2018) reported that the main claim of telecollaborative studies was that learners increased their knowledge (Lee & Markey, 2014; Schenker, 2012), interest (Liaw & Bunn-Le Master, 2010), curiosity (Chen & Yang, 2016), and awareness (Angelova & Zhao, 2016; Chen & Yang, 2016) toward both their own culture and other culturally-grounded standpoints.

Furthermore, Liaw and Bunn-Le Master (2010) pinpointed a change in intercultural exchanges from a mere fact-based information exchange to a more advanced level of sharing personal views on the assigned topics. In their research on intercultural learning, Liaw (2006;

2007), Jin and Erben (2007), Schenker (2012), and Chen and Yang (2016), to name but a few, showed different levels of IC among their participants. Yet, a clear developmental process among participants could not be observed. Thus, it would be fair to say that, according to Furcsa (2009), and Ware and Kramersch (2005), learners developed an awareness of the viewpoints of different individuals and their cultures. In a nutshell, virtual exchanges can be said to trigger learners to develop their IC to different extents, yet, IC was not easily measurable. Therefore, the shift in perspectives towards the target culture and reflections on own culture was used to capture instances of intercultural development (Elola & Oskoz, 2008).

Although the use of telecollaborative programs in educational settings has been reported with successful exchanges, there were still some instances of “failed communication” (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006) between distant learners in different locations. Bueno-Alastuey and Kleban (2016) reported that their Polish participants thought their Spanish partners lacked motivation. In addition, Ware (2013) asserts that some factors, such as a lack of stimulating context, topic development, asking questions, and risk-taking evolved into a failed exchange. In the same line of thought, Ware and Kessler (2016) identified unsuccessful communication that includes questions that were out of context and lacking in depth.

More importantly, opinions differ with regard to assumed intercultural development through mere contact with speakers of other languages (Helm, 2013, 2016; Dooly, 2016; Flowers, Kelsen & Cvitkovic, 2019; Godwin-Jones, 2020; O’Dowd & Dooly, 2020, as cited in Dooly & Vinagre, 2022).

Method

This research was conducted following a quasi-experimental design. The researchers’ decision can be justified by the difficulty of finding university partners for virtual intercultural exchanges and, by contrast, the availability of a pre-existing virtual classroom. More particularly, the researchers used a “*non-equivalent comparison group design without pre-test*” within which an experimental and “a comparison group is used. However, the comparison and experimental groups are not equivalent because of the non-random assignment of persons to groups.” (Hartas, 2010, p.252). Also, researchers do not often have control over the treatment; they rather scrutinize pre-existing groups that have received different treatments.

Participants

Our case study labeled *Global Virtual Classroom* (Mouhadjer, 2010) at the English Department of Abou Bakr Belkaid University, Algeria, offered in the fall of 2020 during one semester, is one instance of a telecollaborative partnership. Under the guidance of their instructor, learners meet twice a week with their distant partners from Africa, Asia, Europe and America to have a first-hand experience through real-time videoconferencing, chat and emails. Participation in this partnership was a course requirement for American students. In contrast, it was a

supplementary class for Algerian keypals by which they can get a certificate approved from East Carolina University.

The focus group consisted of 19 Algerian students from Abou-Bakr Belkaid University engaged in virtual intercultural exchange with American partners from East-Carolina University. The control group also consisted of 19 Algerian students from the same University. The focus group consisted of 19 Algerian students from Abou-Bakr Belkaid University engaged in virtual intercultural exchange with American partners from East-Carolina University. The control group also consisted of 19 Algerian students from the same University. Participants enrolled in the Department of English Language were taken from both genders (14 males and 24 females). Their age ranged between 19 to 25 years old. The sample population was selected using convenience sampling; this is because, in educational contexts, true experimental designs with random assignments are rarely feasible (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Research Instruments

The researchers opted for a self-report questionnaire as a research instrument to conduct this quasi-experimental study. It was divided into two parts: the first part concerned participants' personal information such as gender, age, geographic area, grade level, familiarity with the concept of IC, reading about other cultures and prior intercultural experiences (traveling abroad for an extended time or virtual encounters); While the second part encompassed the "*Intercultural Competence Scale*" developed by Fantini (2007). This scale consists of 53 items, and they are formed as a 5-Likert type. It embraces 11 items addressing the respondents' intercultural knowledge, such as culture-based information and linguistic proficiency; 10 skill items for assessing the participants' capability to communicate with culturally different others; 13 attitude items for evaluating the participants' respect for and openness to different cultures as well as their tolerance to ambiguities; and at last, 18 awareness items that are culture-related awareness about the self and otherness.

Research Procedures

The participants filled in the questionnaire that included statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "no competence" (0%) to "very high competence" (100%). Statistical analyses were conducted using Excel, and then, descriptive statistics were used to examine the participants' IC level as it is disposed of in Table One.

The researchers used the visual inspection of histograms, Q-Q plots and box plots to test for normal distribution and to determine whether parametric or nonparametric tests should be used to analyze the recorded data. The findings indicated that participants' IC scores followed a non-normal distribution; thus, non-parametric tests were preferred to analyze data. To compare participants' IC scores of both control and focus groups, an initial null hypothesis needs to be formulated, which states that there is no difference between the two groups. It is expected that at the end of the study, the null hypothesis is either rejected or not rejected. To this end, the

researchers selected the Mann-Whitney U test to compare between control and focus groups' IC scores as well as to disclose whether overseas experiences reveal any differences in participants' IC.

Results

This study attempted to examine the effectiveness and relevance of engaging Algerian University students in virtual intercultural exchanges to promote their IC. The results are presented in terms of descriptive statistics, followed by a discussion concerning previously published research works within the field of telecollaboration and intercultural development.

Table 1. *Medians for participants' self-evaluation of their IC and its components*

Sample	Total IC	Knowledge	Attitudes	Skills	Awareness
Focus Group	70.68%	50.90%	70.76%	74%	72.22%
Control Group	72.33%	67.27%	78.46%	70%	71.11%

As shown in table one, the results of descriptive analyses reveal that participants in focus groups achieved a good level of IC ($n=19$; $Md=70.68\%$), and so did the control group ($n=19$; $Md=72.33\%$). Scrutinizing the components of IC for more details (see table one), the results indicated that the median of focus group participants in intercultural attitudes, skills and awareness ($n=19$; $Md=70.76\%$; $Md=74\%$; $Md=72.22\%$, respectively) was significantly more than the fourth component, i.e., intercultural knowledge ($n=19$; $Md=50.90\%$). However, the findings display that the control group participants' median in intercultural attitudes, skills and awareness ($n=19$; $Md=78.46\%$; $Md=70\%$; $Md=71.11\%$, respectively) was slightly more than the fourth component, i.e., intercultural knowledge ($n=19$; $Md=67.27\%$).

The results of the Mann-Whitney U test are shown in table two, from which it can be noticed that there is no statistically significant difference in the IC levels of the focus group ($Md=70.68\%$; $n=19$) and control group ($Md=72.33\%$; $n=19$), $U=157$, U -critical value=113 (using sample sizes $n=19$ in both groups, and two-sided level of significance $\alpha=0.05$). Given that our U -test statistic is higher than the U -critical value, we can retain the null hypothesis that the two groups are equal. This means that focus group participants performed on the IC questionnaire on a similar basis as the control group.

Table 2. *Mann-Whitney U test results and medians for IC within focus and control groups*

Outcome	Focus Group		Control Group		U test
	Md	n	Md	n	
IC	70.68%	19	72.33%	19	157

U -critical value =113, $\alpha=0.05$

Next, while collecting data, it was noticed that eight participants from the control group (42,10%) said they traveled abroad for an extended time. Thus, the researchers speculated that this factor might have affected the results. Accordingly, they used the Mann-Whitney U test to disclose whether such overseas experiences may reveal different IC levels. The findings that are displayed in table3 indicate a considerable dissimilarity in the IC levels of participants who traveled abroad for an extended time (Md=82,96%; n=10) and those who have never been overseas (Md= 63,83%; n=28) U = 60, U-critical value=80 (using sample sizes n=10 and n=28; two-sided level of significance $\alpha=0.05$). Given that our U-test statistic is less than the U-critical value, we can reject the null hypothesis that the two groups are equal. This means that participants performed differently on the IC questionnaire.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U test results and medians for IC with regard to overseas experience

Outcome	Overseas experience		No overseas experience		U test
	Md	n	Md	n	
IC	82,96%	10	63,83%	28	60

U-critical value =80, $\alpha=0.05$

In sum, the previously displayed findings in this section demonstrate that control and focus group participants self-evaluated their IC to be at a good level. Concerning the sub-dimensions of IC, participants within both groups scored less in intercultural knowledge as compared to the other components (attitudes, skills, and awareness). Participants were then grouped concerning overseas experiences. Consequently, learners who have been abroad for an extended time exhibited a higher IC level than those who have never traveled overseas.

Discussion

The researchers used a control group with whom to compare the IC scores of the focus group. The above preliminary findings were discussed accurately to find an answer to the given main research question that helped us develop the present research study and confirm some hypothetical questions were in mind regarding the IC level of a selected Algerian University learners' population. The current study found that participants in focus and control groups self-evaluated themselves as having a good level of IC. The median scores of focus group students in intercultural attitudes, skills and awareness components were significantly higher than within the fourth component, i.e., intercultural knowledge. Likewise, the difference in median scores between intercultural attitudes, skills, awareness, and the fourth component, viz., knowledge of control group participants has been reported to be less than within focus group informants. Accordingly, it can be concluded that both groups scored approximately the same overall IC level. More accurately, informants' intercultural knowledge compared to the other IC sub-scales (attitudes, skills, and awareness) was relatively low.

The present preliminary results are not aligned with the findings of some reported studies (Abrams, 2002; Belz & Thorne, 2006; Byram, 1997; Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Lewis & O'Dowd 2016; O'Dowd & Ware, 2009; Toscu & Erten, 2020). The hypothesis put forward at the outset of this research study could neither be confirmed nor rejected due to the interference of the third variable. This finding draws intercultural scholars' attention to the need for further research by re-considering any third variable that might falsify the main findings of the investigation.

These preliminary results may be explained because 42,10% of the sample population of the control group reported being abroad for an extended period of time ranging from three months to three years. In other words, overseas experiences helped learners promote their IC compared to the pre-existing group of learners who participated in a telecollaborative partnership. Similar to some previous studies (Hismanoglu, 2011; Jular, 2007; Jung, 2002), participants who traveled abroad evaluated their IC as well as its sub-dimensions (intercultural knowledge, attitudes, skills & awareness) to be at a high level and higher than that of those who have never been abroad. More importantly, participation in international exchange programs may not be afforded to every student, thus, as an alternative initiative, it has been suggested that teachers can assist their students' IC development through telecollaboration projects (Lazar, 2014), which was the focus of the current investigation.

Conclusion

The current study aimed to explore the relevance of adopting a virtual exchange approach to develop learners' IC in an Algerian University in a non-multilingual context. The findings revealed that participants' IC level was good among control and focus groups. Some issues limit the findings of this preliminary study: (1) the pre-departure level of participants varied concerning various variables like their educational levels (2) there was a great variation in the length of stay abroad for those who traveled overseas (3) their familiarity with IC differed in the how the means and frequency of interaction with their distant relatives/friends, all of these factors mentioned above that the researchers did not control may intervene as a mediator variable, and thus, affect the research findings. The researchers focused only on overseas experiences as a third variable reported in the literature to have a direct link with developing IC and can be substituted with virtual intercultural exchanges, which is the independent variable of this investigation.

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