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# Developing Learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence through Online Exchanges: Case of Third-Year Students in Algeria

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**Abstract**
Foreign Language Education generally aims to produce intercultural speakers who develop relevant language skills necessary for communication and work. In fact, online exchanges provide an excellent opportunity to enhance learners' analytical and critical thinking skills. They can enormously help develop learners' intercultural awareness making them ready to accept cultural differences. This paper examines the relevance of using virtual or online exchange development in language teaching and learning, focusing principally on virtual task categories and the use of Information Communication Technologies, which has become an everyday reality of the 21st century. It seeks to answer the following research questions: Do online exchanges help to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence? Are online communication tools effective for promoting the teaching and learning processes? A student's questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with teachers are adopted as instruments to collect the necessary data. The participants are undergraduate third-year students and EFL university teachers from the Department of English Language at University Djillali Liabes of Sidi Bel Abbes (Algeria). Findings showed positive feedback from the students toward using online exchanges to foster intercultural competencies. They also revealed that teachers know the importance of online tools when teaching cultural issues. Thus, it is worth noting that Information Communication Technologies and online interactions contribute significantly to creating spaces where learners, particularly develop cultural tolerance, improve communication, exchange and promote knowledge besides becoming self-autonomous.

*Keywords*: EFL learners, exchanges, intercultural competence, online learning and teaching, technologies

**Introduction**

As technological tools have rapidly developed in language education, most teachers are eager to employ them in their classrooms to cope with updated, practical learning and teaching. However, the current digital era has enhanced innovative teaching methods and techniques that directly develop learners' motivation. Educators consider using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as the best means to provide learners with the ability to check differently for information. ICTs enhance learners' research possibilities, language skills, and autonomy. The present paper proves that online communication tools are necessary to promote learners' proficiency in the foreign language. It also shows that online exchanges can rapidly develop learners' intercultural abilities, and foster the teaching and learning processes. It tends to answer the following  research questions: Can online exchanges help to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence? Do online communication tools promote the learning and teaching processes? It  presents a practical study to identify online exchanges and their worth in boosting intercultural abilities. Semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire  are adopted to investigate the raised research questions. Since, there are still potential problems with distance learning and teaching, the researcher provides specific recommendations to improve methods, techniques, and materials and to create a good learning environment that will ensure learners' progress in the future.

**Literature Review**
*The Use of ICTs in Education*

Nowadays, educational systems adopt an ICT integration policy to develop all pedagogical practices. Grabe, M., and Grabe, C. (2007) emphasize that integrating innovative technologies in education completely change the way people behave and think. Ghavifekr and Rosdy (2015) argue that integrating Information, Communication, and Technology in educational institutions refers to using computer-based communication that incorporates into the daily classroom instructional process. Rahimpour (2011) focuses that using computers in language teaching and learning can offer a wide variety of multimedia content and other communication channels between learners. Jeong-Bae, Robb and Charismiadji (2010) reveal the advantages of networking the learners can have to confront the challenges of the 21st century, while Pina and Bohn (2015) consider internet technology an imminent variable in educational settings.  Using ICTs can develop students' motivation and interest permitting them to promote language proficiency. It can further help to enhance learners' autonomy.

*Online or Distance Learning versus Traditional Learning*

Researchers generally mention that technology is helpful in language teaching and learning. Ghavifekr and Rosdy (2015) argue that integrating Information and Communication Technology undoubtedly helps teachers to substitute traditional teaching methods with technology-based appoaches. Indeed, using ICTs represents a critical competency to acquire, especially to better adapt to a constantly changing society with relevant linguistic and cultural skills in today's globalized world.

Online learning can quickly benefit foreign language learners and teachers,  allowing them to develop intercultural communication and language skills. Contrary to traditional classrooms, teachers can find themselves in such situations, whereby they have to manage various interactions with learners and focus on learners' attention via an electronic platform. Stickler and Shi (2015)

explain that this fact necessitates them to make extra efforts to enhance the learning process. Worley and Tesdell (2009) mention that because every task online is done differently in traditional classrooms, teachers make more efforts. Baralt (2014) adds that tasks functioning well in person do not work at a distance. Jarvis (2009) argues that distance learning requires specific administration and pedagogical management, such as technical support, quality assurance, course design, and learning support.

### *Advantages of Online Teaching and Learning*

In recent years, online teaching and learning emerged as an alternative to the physical classroom setting and further expanded by the covid-19 spread. Garcia-Penalvo, and Seoane-Pardo (2014) mention that online education can help to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Buckley (2022) distinguishes three types of online learning notably: asynchronous learning, whereby learning does not take place in real-time; synchronous learning, whereby students and teachers are required to interact simultaneously; and finally, blended (hybrid) learning that allows for both in-person and online interaction.

All in all, online or distance teaching benefits learners as it offers many opportunities to study languages. It provides students with the possibility to develop web-literacy abilities, to write reports or articles, and to conduct oral communications in meetings or seminars. It further helps them to learn particular words, and gives them the possibility to promote intercultural abilities. While students depend on themselves to achieve academic success, they can further develop a certain level of autonomy and spontaneity.

In virtual learning; knowledge can be shared by video-conferencing, uploading videos from youtube, word-pdf documents, social media, and other e-systems; which is strongly practical in promoting learners' digital literacy. According to Stanley (2013), this latter refers to the ability to perform tasks in a digital environment. Gadbury, Bray, and Austin (2014) argue that digital literacy includes the ability to read media and apply new knowledge obtained from digital environments. Korporets (2019) adds that it permits a wide range of information to circulate quickly among students.

Online teaching and learning platforms become fundamental in teaching, particulary, after the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This latter was the principal reason that stimulated the use of distance learning in teaching languages and other disciplines to confront severe in-person problems, notably from the serious damage that the virus may provoke. Although, there exists a considerable number of resources like those of Chapelle (2014), Thomas and Reinders (2012), and Gonzalez-Lloret (2016), which tend to focus on technology, distance language education, and online video-based interaction; there are still no good methodological guides for teachers to explain to them how to undertake successful distance teaching and learning. Compton (2009) emphasizes that teachers may fail online to develop socialization, which is pertinent for language education. Indeed, there is no doubt that video-based interaction is entirely different from traditional face-to-face interaction, as no direct human interaction occurs.

### Methods

The researcher adopted a mixed-method approach research focusing on experimental methodology. Both qualitative and quantitative were used to examine learners' responses to online interactions and explore EFL teachers' points of view toward the use of online exchanges in teaching English as a foreign language; while promoting learners' communication competencies.

### Participants

The participants are EFL university teachers, who were directly interviewed. Third-year LMD students were also randomly selected to fill in a questionnaire. However, both participants are  from the Department of English Language at Djillali Liabes University, Sidi-Bel-Abbes (Algeria).This study took place at the beginning of the year 2022/2023.

### Research Instruments

 This study includes two research instruments: a semi-structured interview with 10 EFL teachers and a survey addressed to three groups of third-year undergraduate students at Djilali Liabes University of Sidi Bel Abbes, Algeria. Each group consists of 40 students, approximately 120. However, students were asked to fill in a questionnaire, which was randomly distributed among them. It is composed of a set of semi-open and closed questions in order to obtain general information, and to explore their attitudes via online interactions. Teachers were directly asked about their own experience with online teaching to explore the difficulties they constantly confront and the solutions they may provide. A combination of both approaches, quantitative and qualitative, helps to determine the results**.**

### Research Procedures

Further, once data were collected through the students' questionnaire and the teachers' interview about perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs toward online interactions and cultural competencies, the researcher proceeded the analysis of findings. For the treatment of results, the researcher used Microsoft Office Excel 2010. The practical procedure relied on the validity, credibility of data, and respected ethics of academic researches with the agreement of participants and anonymity of their identity.

## Findings
### Interview Results

The data obtained from the interview are as follows:

*Question One:* Do you use online tools while teaching EFL learners? What do you think about online teaching?

The obtained result for this question is that: six teachers responded positively, confirming that it is pertinent to shift to online teaching, to cope with technological advances, and to face any further pandemics.  They usually rely on social networking sites, Facebook pages, posts on social media, WhatsApp, PowerPoint, zoom, Email, SMS, moodle, etc.They also confirm that such tools can bring advantages to learners, for they can watch, listen, analyze, discuss, argue and communicate, etc. Other four teachers mentioned that they are still not ready to engage in online or distance teaching because of their lack of experience and the unavailability of materials.

*Question Two:* What kind of difficulties do you find while teaching online?

The respondents strongly agree that they may confront a set of difficulties, which are sometimes hard to solve immediately, such as the problem of connectivity and fatigue. They can have people other than students; who may disturb their online meetings. They also may be obliged to do many things simultaneously. For instance, they can type an answer for a student while

simultaneously doing their best to solve any technical problem. They also agree that certain students remain reluctant. However, these learners are still dependent on face-to-face learning.

*Question Three:* Do online exchanges help to enhance learners' communicative competence?

        All the interviewed teachers approve that video-based interactions and online exchanges are effective to  develop learners' language skills, and  to train intercultural speakers. They constantly encourage learners to maximize interaction in order to enhance their oral skills. They also mentioned that they have to diversify online tasks and activities to boost learners' motivation and intercultural abilities.

*Question Four:* Do you have any suggestions to resolve major problems of online teaching?

        The respondents suggest training for teachers and learners to enable them to do their tasks successfully. They urge higher educational institutions in Algeria to make specialized materials available for teachers and learners.

*Students' Questionnaire*

        The data obtained from the student's questionnaire are as follows:

*Question One:* Do you interact online with teachers and other people from other cultures?

        All the respondents approve that they constantly interact online with teachers, classmates, and people from around the world. However, these interactions help them to open up to new experiences and cultures.

*Question Two:* How do you communicate with them?

        All the participants agree on using Whatsapp, Facebook, Moodle, phone calls, forum, SMS, posts in social media, Email, zoom, etc.

*Question Three:* Do you face any challenges in doing online learning?

        Most of participants insist on the problem of poor internet debit that may hamper their tasks.

*Question Four:* What benefits can online interaction bring to you?

All of the respondents agree that it principally helps them to develop language skills and promote inter-communication. It also motivates them to learn and start new experiences.

**Discussion**

        The semi-structured interview with teachers revealed that online communication tools play a crucial role in developing the learning and teaching processes. They tremendously help to change teacher-centered approaches towards learner-centered ones. They can further enhance learners' intercultural communication skills.

        Online teaching helps learners improve language skills, notably reading, writing, speaking, and listening. For instance, students can watch videos and learn from them. They can also analyze, express ideas and thoughts, and give arguments or clarifications on specific issues. They can even become more imaginative and creative.

        Students' questionnaire indicates that learners can promote language skills. They can broaden their knowledge by exchanging ideas and points of view with teachers, learners, and people from different parts of the world. In fact, learners can identify, know and understand other cultures. They can also enhance intercultural tolerance.

While technology has an essential function in acquiring techno- literacy, it is difficult to ascertain that it facilitates all kinds of learning. Indeed, there are difficulties that every teacher may confront  when doing distance or online teaching. They may result from certain factors that can be summarized as follows:

- Learners can be reluctant towards distance education because they get used to traditional or face-to-face learning in which the teacher is the spoon-feeder. They can be de-motivated because they are not familiar with this type of teaching.
- In distance learning, learners' attention is mostly devoted to technical and social features. Stickler and Shi (2013) argue that technical problems can disturb both learners' and teachers' expectations. Gleason (2013) confirms that teachers must provide extra cognitive efforts to strengthen interaction and attract learners' attention.
- There might be specific technical problems and  weak trainings.

## *Research Implications*

To overcome significant problems that can hamper online learning and to ensure successful teaching and learning, the researcher presents the following recommendations:

- Teachers and students need to use different materials for online teaching and learning. In fact, advanced technology and communication devices should be available for students; wherever they are, either at school or home.
- Professional experts must ensure effective e-learning; because not all teachers are well-trained in using e-platforms. They should be literate and capable of  using ICTs and network technology.
- Teachers must depend on the new teaching methodologies that suit the transfer from traditional learning to e-learning.
- Teachers must diversify online courses to attract students' interest.
- Teachers should make sure to have a good internet connection.
- Teachers must play the role of chairpersons and facilitators of learning. Harmer (2001) argue that a teacher performs eight functions in language teaching, notably controller, assessor, organizer, prompter, participant, facilitator, tutor, and investigator. Indeed, teachers must organize and coordinate online rather than monopolize the learning process.
- Teachers have to emphasize the learners' needs.  Needs analysis or what learners need to know should be the starting point for the design of courses.
- Teachers must focus on online tasks related to culture, linguistics, literature, and civilization to foster learners' intercultural abilities.
- They must encourage learners to become autonomous. They must also show them primary techniques on how they can participate at a distance in the planning of the lessons.
- Teachers must rely on up-to-date materials; that may contribute effectively to developing learners' skills and autonomy.
- Teachers must be curious, self-confident, and helpful. Accordingly, Bell (2002) confirms that teachers in language education can not improve their knowledge and skills in a particular discipline; unless they develop three essential features notably: curiosity, confidence, and collaboration. This means that teachers must give importance to the courses. They must also be ready to start new experiences, and to work in collaboration with their experienced colleagues.

- Teachers must include short breaks between online sessions to avoid learners' problems of anxiety and fatigue or boredom.

## Conclusion

This study aims to shed light on some aspects of online teaching, particularly the formation of intercultural speakers. Online education is more effective in comparison to traditional education, because using ICTs helps develop a learning milieu that is more attractive for teachers and learners. In fact, using the internet or online exchanges enhances learners' confidence to communicate better. Learners can express thoughts and ideas with teachers, classmates, and other people worldwide. Online contacts and exchanges can further help them develop intercultural tolerance and understanding. Implementing technology in schools and universities in different countries of the world, particulary in Algeria, still needs severe consideration related to sound teacher training to better develop the systems of education at different levels.

## About the Author

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