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Blending Learning, Bridging Cultures: COIL for EFL Speaking and Writing

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ABSTRACT: *As the cognizance of living in a globalized world intensifies, the need to foster both intercultural competence and productive skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has become increasingly urgent. Linguistic proficiency alone is not sufficient to navigate the complexities of this interconnected world; therefore, fostering an ability to move from a state of monoculturalism to bi- or multi-culturalism should be a priority for EFL teachers (Damen, 1987). As a natural consequence of current technological advancements, blended learning emerges as an innovative teaching approach that combines face-to-face and online language instruction for maximum learner engagement. This paper intends to explore how Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Programs, as a form of blended learning, promote meaningful intercultural communication to improve learners' speaking and writing skills ultimately. By integrating online blogs for reflective writing and video conferencing for real-time cross-cultural discussions, this COIL-based blended learning model creates authentic communicative opportunities while fostering the learners' productive skills. This paper offers a conceptual exploration, drawing on existing literature and theoretical perspectives to examine the pedagogical implications of COIL models and their potential to position EFL learners as global citizens who understand the nuances of intercultural encounters and articulate their thoughts with clarity and accuracy in both writing and speaking communication.*

KEYWORDS: : blended learning, productive skills, COIL programs, intercultural communication .

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Introduction

Accrediting globalization, the world is witnessing a massive wave of frequent international contact. This openness and interconnectedness have led the educational system at present to be in a transitional phase. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction has naturally witnessed this transition, where the focus is not only on creating linguistically competent learners but also on fostering global citizens. In September 2023, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education (AMHE) began implementing English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in universities. This initiative aims to enhance international engagement and modernize the educational system. This shift requires pedagogical approaches that integrate both communicative skills and intercultural competence, preparing learners to engage in meaningful communication in diverse contexts. As technology has developed, blended learning, digital learning, and e-learning are reshaping EFL education so that initiatives such as collaborative online international learning (COIL) have become increasingly possible. Several studies have emphasized the significance of integrating intercultural communication skills in EFL classrooms. For instance, an exploratory study found that students who followed a COIL course had a positive attitude toward international online collaboration but also found that diversity in communication styles may hinder successful learning experiences (Kayumova & Sadykova, 2016). Another recent study conducted by Carlisle and Sáenz (2023) examined the impact of COIL on English language learners and found that a COIL experience was positive despite challenges, as it boosted motivation and introduced a genuine multicultural exchange. Despite growing interest in COIL as a blended learning approach, the existing literature remains largely theoretical or exploratory, with limited experimental studies providing empirical validation. This paper explores the pedagogical potential of COIL as a blended learning model for promoting both productive language skills and intercultural competence in EFL classrooms. It will also highlight the challenges and implications of implementing COIL in EFL settings to possibly inform better designs and strategies and to identify directions for future empirical investigations.

Research Method

This research uses a literature review approach that aims at examining the effectiveness of COIL as a blended learning approach for fostering both productive language skills and intercultural competence in EFL classrooms. This process involved synthesizing existing research on blended learning, intercultural competence, productive skills, and COIL implementation. The literature was analyzed to reveal trends, challenges, and best practices to effectively integrate COIL-based blended learning in EFL instruction and to inform future pedagogical practices and strategies.

Literature Review

1. Blended Learning in EFL

Blended learning is considered one of the modern trends based upon employing information technology in designing new learning situations that increase active learning and learner-centered strategies. It emerged as one of the most popular pedagogical concepts at the beginning of the 2000s. Moore and Kearsley (2011) clarified that the starting point of blended learning was not because of internet prevalence, but it can be linked to correspondence education, where students received and submitted coursework via postal mail (e.g., the University of London's external program in 1858). Moore and Kearsley (2011) categorized blended education into five generations, which are: correspondence, broadcast radio and television, open universities, teleconferencing, and the Internet/Web. The cardinal tenet behind blended learning is about being able to teach while students and teachers are not in the same context at all (Moore and Kearsley,

2011). This idea remained relevant across all generations. Graham (2006) defined blended learning as: "A combination of instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional face-to-face (FTF) learning systems and computer-mediated learning". As pointed out by Graham (2004: 10-12), blended learning can occur at different levels, such as the student activity level, course level, program level, and institutional level. Huang, Zhou, and Wang (2006) identified three key characteristics of blended learning. First, it offers flexibility in providing learning resources. Second, it supports learning diversity, catering to the varied learning styles, proficiencies, and abilities of students. This makes it possible to foster individualized and self-regulated learning. Third, it enhances the e-learning experience, allowing instructors to refine and improve their current teaching practices. However, this approach does not come without shortcomings. Lu and Chen (2013) highlighted four possible disadvantages of blended learning related to teachers, students, resources, and evaluation. Teachers struggle to balance traditional and online resources, while students may face cognitive overload or difficulties accessing online platforms. Additionally, learning resources often lack interaction, meaning they rely heavily on static materials like e- books or pre-recorded lectures rather than engaging activities such as discussions or collaborative tasks. Lastly, the diverse assessment methods in blended learning can make evaluation complex and challenging.

2. Linguistic Competence and Communicative Competence

According to Chomsky (1965): ''linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions''. The distinction between competence and performance, two concepts coined by Noam Chomsky (1965), has been incredibly influential. Competence refers to the internalized understanding of a language that enables a speaker to comprehend and produce grammatically correct sentences. This encompasses knowledge of syntax (sentence structure), phonology (sound systems), and semantics (meaning). Performance, on the other hand, refers to the actual use of language in concrete situations. It is observable through speech or writing and it is influenced by external factors as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, and errors (random or characteristic)' Chomsky (1965). As Chomsky fully relegated the social nature of language, considering it as an a biological, cognitive, and rule-based faculty rather than a social construct, Dell Hymes (1972) expanded on his ideas by introducing the concept of communicative competence, which includes not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately and meaningfully in different social contexts. In Saville Troike's (2003) own words "Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language code but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately in any given situation. Further, it involves the social and cultural knowledge speakers are presumed to have, which enables them to use and interpret linguistic forms. (p.18)''. Following this line of thought, language learning cannot be viewed as merely grammatical knowledge, but also as how to use that knowledge in communication. Based on Hymes' theory, the North Americans Canale and Swain (1983) proposed a communicative competence model that included four distinct yet interconnected abilities: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Together, these competences form communicative competence, ensuring that communication is both linguistically accurate and socially appropriate. Echoing this model, Celce-Murcia et al (1995) insisted on the interconnected relationship between language, socio-

cultural aspects, and communicative competence, and considered the primary goal of language instruction should be:'' To go beyond the teaching of the discrete elements, rules, and patterns of the target language and to develop the learners' ability to take part in spontaneous and meaningful communication in different contexts with different people, on different topics, for different purposes''.

3. Intercultural Competence and Productive Skills

As Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) explained, foreign language instruction was believed to help learners grow intellectually as they had no expectations of using these learned languages in everyday life. This view is further sustained by other academics, such as Demircioğlu (1949), who wrote that learning Latin according to Grammar Translation Method (GTM) practices resulted in the ability to make "correct sentences by working the mind correctly" (p. 180). Learners "were given explanations of individual points of grammar, and then they were given sentences which exemplified these points" (Harmer, 2007, p. 63). Another instance is the Audiolingual Method (ALM) practices that involve cultivating habits by reinforcing correct language use. Students learned language through a sequence of drills that focused on imitation, repetition, and practice. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Teachers, therefore, were preoccupied with the linguistic aspect rather than considering the intercultural aspect of language as well.

Oral and written skills are classified as productive skills, as they involve learners generating information through language rather than receiving it. These skills are known to be the most difficult to acquire by the learners. Al Hosni (2014) highlights the fact that "it has been widely noticed that students face many difficulties in speaking English" (p.22). According to Rattanadilok Na Phuket (2015), writing is also challenging to master since the learners must learn ''syntax and morphology, a wide range of vocabulary, and a good command over conventional forms and over the means of signaling the relation of the texts"(p.100). The struggle can often stem from neglecting the intercultural and communicative dimensions of language. The inability to navigate cultural nuances, idiomatic expressions, and the subtleties of social interaction can hinder one's ability to communicate fluently and confidently. Language and culture are intertwined, with language not only reflecting culture but also playing an active role in shaping it (Brown, 2007). Therefore, implementing intercultural communication in EFL classrooms provides a natural impetus to use English meaningfully and appropriately in both written and oral communication. To be culturally competent is to have the ability to interact appropriately and effectively with people from other cultures and languages (Fantini, 2020) and to act as a mediator (Byram, 1997) between distinct "communicative practices" (McConachy, 2022) that shape intercultural interactions. Engaging with speakers from different cultural backgrounds provides firsthand insights into conversational norms, idiomatic expressions, and contextual language use. Similarly, understanding and embracing the diversity of cultures allows learners to be critical writers and experiment with different structures, tones, and rhetorical strategies.

4. COIL-Based Blended Learning for Productive Skills

The potential of blended learning extends beyond traditional classroom settings. It can also include opportunities for internationalisation and learning intercultural communicative skills. These skills include attributes such as respect, openness, curiosity, cultural knowledge, and skills such as the ability to observe, listen, evaluate, and interpret (Deardorff, 2006). Collaborative online international learning (COIL) is an inclusive educational practice, as most students can participate without having to travel abroad for exchange programs. It allows the involvement of learner groups in intercultural interactions, where they engage with partners from different cultural backgrounds or geographic locations (O'Dowd, 2018). In these virtual learning environments, students engage in collaborative discussions that promote higher-order cognitive skills, including problem-solving, critical thinking, reasoning, and reflection, while also fostering intercultural connections (Avello & Duart, 2016). By engaging in international collaborative projects, students can be familiarized with a broader range of language skills. Usó- Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006, 2008), and Savignon (2002) presented various writing strategies that implement COIL. 'Continuous written' dialogue is one of these strategies, which can be through traditional letters, e-mails, or social networks (e.g., Weibo) to connect two learners with different native languages and discuss a cultural theme. Another activity is 'Fill in information', in which learners need to work in intercultural groups to finish the text in writing after they have been given a piece of information about a cultural theme. Speaking, however, requires different strategies. Teachers can make use of visual media such as YouTube to train their learners to be public speakers. This oral activity is ideal because it allows learners to speak effectively to a global audience, enhancing their oral skills and intercultural awareness simultaneously. Dhanesh (2011) explained: "Any attempt at public speaking that is not sensitive to the plurality of the audience in such an increasingly diverse and multicultural world is almost certainly bound to fail" (p.16-2). There are many resources available with appropriate material to teach and discuss questions, a few to mention are: Global Citizen, Journeys in Film, My Hero Stories, BBC World News Travel Show, etc.

Discussion

The paper conceptually explores the pedagogical implications of COIL models, drawing on literature and theory. It examines how these models can foster intercultural competence among EFL learners, enhancing their ability to communicate clearly and accurately in both spoken and written forms. To achieve this aim, the researcher conducted a literature review to synthesize existing research on blended learning, intercultural competence, productive skills, and COIL implementation. The findings suggest that COIL can be effectively integrated into blended learning environments, leveraging both synchronous and asynchronous communication, and can enhance productive skills –speaking and writing- by providing authentic interaction opportunities.

Challenges facing Blended Learning

Implementing blended learning, especially as a COIL-based approach,is accompanied by various challenges that may hinder its full potential. Hofmann (2011) identifies several technical, organizational, and design issues related to blended learning, including:

1.Ensuring that participants can effectively use the technology.

2.Challenging the belief that blended learning is less effective than traditional teaching methods.

3.Managing and tracking participants' progress.

4.Selecting the most suitable delivery method for the learning objectives.

5.Ensuring that online content remains interactive rather than simply lecturing participants.

6.Addressing the computer-related anxiety some adults may experience (Saade and Kira, 2009).

7.Recognizing that negative emotions such as frustration, confusion, anger, and anxiety can impact productivity, learning, social interactions, and overall well-being.

Future Research Directions

Given that COIL is a relatively recent pedagogical approach, more empirical research on integrating COIL in EFL classrooms to enhance productive skills is needed to asssess its effectiveness and inform better designs and strategies. Curriculum designers and policy makers should also enrich the Algerian EFL curriculum with COIL-based activities and authentic intercultural interactions to foster global citizenship and enhance written and spoken communication. Moreover, Research should explore strategies for bridging the digital divide and provide teachers with training programs and instructional materials to design and implement blended learning effectively. By addressing these areas, future research can guarantee, to a certain degree, the optimization of COIL-based blended learning as an effective educational approach.

Conclusion

In an increasingly global society, EFL instruction is compelled to shift its priorities to meet the demands of the current technological era. COIL-based blended learning presents a promising educational model that combines the strengths of both traditional and digital learning environments. By exploring the relationship between English teaching and intercultural communication, it is believed that learners can be familiarized with a broader range of spoken and written language skills, and can develop cultural understanding, critical thinking, and increased engagement. Research should focus on finding solutions to technical, organizational, and design challenges as well as conducting more empirical studies that yield applicable

results. The Algerian educational landscape, in particular, is witnessing an openness to international contact that demands EFL instruction to be inclusive, intercultural, and adaptable to the evolving technological and communicative needs of learners. To this end, COIL programs need to be integrated effectively in EFL courses to equip learners with the necessary skills to help them navigate the complexities of this globalized world.

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