

Effect of Cooperative Learning Instruction and Blogs on Apprehension of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of cooperative learning and blog instruction in a culturally mixed group on decreasing intercultural communication apprehension. The study was implemented in classrooms that include Lebanese and non-Lebanese participants at two universities in Lebanon. The study used a pretest–posttest experimental design, whereby five writing intact classes were randomly assigned to control and experimental conditions. One hundred two ($N = 102$) university students from diverse cultural backgrounds participated in the study. The Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension survey and the interview as a qualitative method were used to elicit data to validate or reject the main assumption of the study. The analysis of the emergent themes along with the comparison between results of the pre and post of the Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension proved the effectiveness of cooperative instruction through the use of blogs in decreasing the students' intercultural communication apprehension.

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apprehension, blog, cooperative learning, intercultural communication, intercultural sensitivity, language teaching, teaching methodology

Introduction

The present study has been conducted at two American universities located in Lebanon, and the objective was to investigate the effectiveness of the use of cooperative learning instruction in culturally mixed group through blogs.

Higher education setting has been an area in which intercultural interactions occur on a regular basis as there is a relentless need for awareness of cultural likenesses and differences. Intercultural communication competence is a necessity for constructing the interactions in the globalized community and the current economic and technological developments demand, ensuring intercultural communication skills (Salazar & Agüero, 2016). Research has indicated that the effective intercultural communication requires accepting and tolerating the cultural differences and the aspects influencing the interaction skills and behavior (Galante, 2015; Salazar & Agüero, 2016; Tirado-Morueta, Maraver-López, & Hernando-Gómez, 2018).

Cooperative learning is a component of the suggested model investigated in this study because it is a dynamic method characterized by reduced anxiety, increased safety, freedom, and tolerance for one another as valuable group members (Buchs, Filippou, Pulfrey, & Volpé, 2017). It is a model that fosters critical thinking (Dabaghmanesh, Zamanian, & Bagheri, 2013) as well as improve learners' perceptions of learning, although the implementation of some cooperative learning structures and methods might be challenging (Buchs et al., 2017).

The blog instruction also forms a major component of the proposed model as it has been proved that interactive technologies increasingly improve intercultural communication skills (Ware, 2013; Ware & Rivas, 2012).

The study is significant as it may contribute to the improvement of the quality of instruction needed to improve the intercultural communication skills of students. It is the first study that investigates the effect of cooperative learning-based groups and blog instruction in decreasing the intercultural communication apprehension of university learners and improving their perceptions of the experience. In this specific case, each group of students consisted of a non-Lebanese learner (or a learner with non-Lebanese culture) mixed in the same language classrooms with learners of Lebanese culture attending to language classes in two American Universities in Lebanon.

This study has addressed the following research questions:

What is the relative effect of using cooperative learning instruction together with the use of blogs in comparison with the regular instruction

1. in decreasing the intercultural communication apprehension of university learners?
2. in improving the perceptions of university learners of the intercultural communication experience?

Theoretical Framework

The study was the first study that investigated the effect of cooperative learning-based groups and blog instruction in decreasing the intercultural communication apprehension of university learners and improving their perceptions of the experience. The study assumed that intercultural communication competence is a necessity for constructing the interactions in the globalized community (Salazar & Agüero, 2016). Therefore, the present study is framed within the communicative competence, active learning, community sharing, and cognitive-motivational theories.

First, the present study is framed within the communicative competence, active learning, community sharing, and cognitive-motivational theories. The communicative competence theory underscores that cooperative language learning helps students develop communicative competence (Richards & Rogers, 2011). As such, the study used cooperative learning as a component of the suggested model investigated in this study because it is a dynamic method characterized by reduced anxiety, increased safety, freedom, and tolerance for one another as valuable group members (Buchs et al., 2017). Furthermore, the study used the blog as the second main component of the adopted model. Research has focused on the vital role of technology in general in improving perceptions of learning (Ai, 2017; Li, 2018). Furthermore, the blog becomes a means of socialization and a medium of public debate and “self-expression” (Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008, p. 530). Another advantage is that blogs allow communication that will not be restrained by location or distance (Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). Learners usually use blogs to express their personal thoughts and feelings (Dickey, 2004).

Second, the active learning theory also forms a framework for this study as active learning was adopted as a consequence for implementing cooperative learning. Therefore, the cooperative learning adopted in this study falls under active learning instruction that may help the experimental group of participants increase their amount of communication while using the blog. Third, the community sharing theory frames this study as well as it entails guidelines required for the division of labor because a cooperative group makes the members committed to optimize the learning of each other (Dabaghmanesh et al., 2013).

Therefore, the experimental group participants were asked to communicate in groups using the globalized community forum ensured by the blog.

Fourth, the cognitive-motivational theory on self-regulation and adaptable learning (Boekaerts, 1997) might also frame this study as it asserts the significance of students' individual evaluation of learning.

Careful Planning for Effective Intercultural Communication

Language teachers should carry out careful planning of the classroom activities to ensure that the intercultural communication happens and accomplishes its objectives. Spontaneous intercultural communications do not usually happen if students are not involved in teamwork with peers of different cultures as students usually prefer to work with peers from a similar cultural background (de Wit, 1995). Furthermore, many international students suffer from tremendous stress while adjusting to the culture of the host-institute (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010). It has been proved that study abroad programs enhance intercultural competence, but only strong, long, direct, appealing, one-to-one interactions can improve skills that allow them to work efficiently with individuals from other cultures. As such, teachers should ensure that both their local and international students carry out carefully structured tasks with peers from different cultures during their academic study to enhance intercultural interactions. Then, as students' concerns about social and emotional challenges in mixed groups decrease, teachers can plan more creative and demanding tasks for the students. It is obvious that the teacher plays a major role in ensuring the implementation of multicultural teams (Volet & Ang, 2012).

Information and Communication Technology Tools as Means for Effective Intercultural Communication

Intercultural dialogue demands openness and empathy (Ganesh & Holmes, 2011). It also requires communicators to be mindful of their personal values and dispositions that might hinder a profound understanding of others. For this reason, internationalization should enable students to understand the interdependence among cultures and prepare them to operate in an intercultural context (de Wit, 1995). Likewise, to achieve intercultural dialogue, communicators must be open to accepting differences.

The study intended to address two questions examining whether cooperative learning-based groups and blog instruction suggested model is effective in decreasing the intercultural communication apprehension of university learners and improving their perceptions of the experience. Intercultural New Media Studies (INMS) explains the connection between information and communication technology tools and intercultural communication, as well as investigates new digital theories of intercultural communication theories. Therefore, INMS

increases the understanding of intercultural communication in the digital age (Shuter, 2012). As such, the affordability or the very low cost of blog, as a vital component of the suggested study model, makes it a popular technological model in educational contexts (Deng & Yuen, 2011). Furthermore, the international education should have an emphasis on how to integrate cultural features into the curricula and how to motivate students to explore other cultures abroad (Bok, 2006; Paige & Goode, 2009). As such, combining students of different cultures together in cooperative learning group and asking them to cooperate to do their research projects using a blog could be investigated to ensure improved perceptions of learning experience. Theorizing intercultural communication necessitates the integration of culture into communication theory, a task that has been approached in several ways (Gudykunst, 2005). Nevertheless, theorizing intercultural communication is not an easy task due to the intrinsic difficulty of theorizing culture itself and the fact that there are levels of changeability and differences within a culture and among cultures (Perry & Southwell, 2011). Therefore, in alignment with INMS, this study employed Lebanese and non-Lebanese participants to work on research projects discussing the benefits and the challenges of intercultural communication among some Lebanese and non-Lebanese participants living in Lebanon. It has been proved that study abroad programs enhance intercultural competence, but only strong, long, direct, appealing, one-to-one interactions can improve skills that allow them to work efficiently with individuals from other cultures. As such, teachers should ensure that both their local and international students carry out carefully structured tasks with peers from different cultures during their academic study to enhance intercultural interactions.

Blog as a Tool for Effective Intercultural Communication

Many studies show that students see blogs as a collaborative learning tool that fosters communication, and its use is therefore seen as a very positive technique (Chai, Das, & Rao, 2012; de Almeida, 2008; Ifinedo, 2017; Kuo, Belland, & Kuo, 2017). Using blogs as pedagogical tools for fostering intercultural communication necessitates the need to exchange, react, and encourage external participation. The linguistic and cultural mediation carried out by the teacher intends to construct meaning and to avoid confusion between the foreign language and culture and what is considered as students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Melo-Pfeifer, 2015). As such, the blog becomes a means of socialization and a medium of public debate and "self-expression" (Sykes et al., 2008, p. 530). Another advantage is that blogs allow communication that will not be restrained by location or distance (Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). Moreover, the affordability or the very low cost of blog makes it a popular technological model in educational contexts (Deng & Yuen, 2011). Blogs can be used as a means of collaboration, reflection, and interaction among teachers as well

(Deng & Yuen, 2011). Moreover, blogs can be used as a good tool to enhance reading and critical thinking skills by reading and commenting on others' blogs; in fact, there are many blog-based activities that are effective in improving reading (Churchill, 2009).

Research has focused on the vital role of technology in improving perceptions of learning (Ai, 2017; Li, 2018). Learners usually use blogs to express their personal thoughts and feelings (Dickey, 2004). Furthermore, teachers, students, and others use the blog as a means of communication and interaction with each other, with peers and with other people (Awada, Diab, & Gutierrezcolon, 2018; Farmer, Yue, & Brooks, 2008; Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, & Conole, 2008; Nackerud & Scaletta, 2008). Hence, the blog creates collaborative dynamics related to the use of a language and its culture and facilitates plurilingual and intercultural interactions and forms a forum for different learning communities; for this reason, some researchers thought that teachers could use blogging to provide students with the necessary constructive and corrective feedback (Ellison & Wu, 2008). The blog features in general and the simple user interfaces feature in particular make the blog one of the most user-friendly forums in terms of adding entries, updating published content or posting and keeping content, or creating new pages (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004). One more notable advantage of using blog in educational contexts is that blog facilitates and improves the communication between learners and teachers (Kim, 2008). Nevertheless, some other studies revealed the reasons for the negative perceptions of some learners: the inability to handle technology and technological troubleshoots (Ai, 2017); the desire to find a way to keep the privacy of the blog posts and not to make them public (Xie & Sharma, 2005); and the dislike of giving or receiving comments or the discomfort to send or receive peer feedback (Ellison & Wu, 2008).

Group Work and Knowledge Construction in Intercultural Educational Contexts

Liu and Dall'Alba (2012) proved that some progressively globalized and multicultural communities such as Australia (which comprises around 25% of the population born abroad and 200 diverse spoken languages demands) have the intercultural communication skills as a prerequisite to operate effectively in their internationalized community. However, it seems that the courses designed to improve the intercultural communication skills of students and to make them active, intercultural communicators teach them cognitive but not affective learning. The instructional materials of such courses were merely lectures, analyses, and presentations that lacked the content, the material, and the objectives to provide students with the tools and skills needed to operate in culturally diverse settings (Milhouse, 1996). Furthermore, Yim and Warschauer (2017) and

Borthwick and Gallagher-Brett (2014) argue that collaborative writing cannot be improved in an online environment due to technological obstacles.

There has been an adoption of a multidimensional approach, which was broadly implemented in intercultural training as introduced and practiced by Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003). This approach identified the mechanisms of intercultural efficiency to contain appropriateness along with knowledge; however, the design of learning activities that allow students to practice their knowledge in suitable intercultural settings and to reflect upon their learning is still not viable (Liu & Dall'Alba, 2012).

Challenges Facing the Development of Intercultural Competence in Higher Education

One of the major objectives of intercultural communication courses is to develop the intercultural competence of the students. According to different authors, this competence should be developed in higher education because it is necessary for preparing students to deal with present conditions of multiplicity and globalization (Paige & Goode, 2009). The present study intended to examine whether cooperative learning-based groups and blog instruction could be effective in decreasing the intercultural communication apprehension of university learners of different cultures. The study was conducted at two American universities located in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon.

This shift in higher education would provide opportunities for campus collaboration, particularly among faculty, intercultural scholars, and international education specialists. The two American universities that formed the context of the study encouraged internationalization and made students exchange program agreements aiming at ensuring cultural openness and awareness.

Kehm and Teichler (2007) indicated that internationalization endeavors are often attempted and developed by policy makers. However, the discussions targeting the development of the intercultural competence skills do not usually take place among specialists who have vigorously conducted research in intercultural competence. What is even worse is that policy makers, specialists, and faculty perceive the development of intercultural competence in a different way. The international education should have an emphasis on how to integrate cultural features into the curricula and how to motivate students to explore other cultures abroad (Bok, 2006; Paige & Goode, 2009). However, the intercultural communication academics often focus on the theoretical aspects of intercultural competence such as the discussions about the components of competence and efforts to corroborate such components so that the usefulness in cross-cultural communication can be measured (Bradford, Allen, & Beisser, 1998). This emphasis on the conceptualization and theorization has historically failed to effectively tackle the real-world issues related to intercultural competence. Nevertheless, there has been a recent growth in the cross-disciplinary

association between scholars in international education and intercultural communication (Deardorff, 2006) because there is a tremendous need for effective assessment tools and measures for the internationalization of endeavors. In the past decade, the intercultural communication scholars want to emphasize the fact that it is their duty to support the programs in assessment and in optimizing the effect of the internationalization efforts. They do this by eliciting data from learners who have undergone international experiences, and with the analysis and interpretation of this data, researchers are proposing new ways in which intercultural communication courses would support the present globalized education as well as the students' international experiences (Liu & Dall'Alba, 2012). Therefore, this study intended to investigate as well whether the blog and cooperative learning-based grouping of students of different cultures could improve the learners' perceptions of the learning experience.

The Affective Aspects of the Intercultural Competence

There is an agreement among most scholars that intercultural competence can be defined as the ability to successfully and appropriately interact in an intercultural setting (Awada et al., 2018; Lustig & Koester, 2006; Perry & Southwell, 2011). This fact takes us to the following assumptions: (a) Intercultural competence is framed within the intercultural communication theory, whereby scholars are likely to agree on the conceptualization of the intercultural competence based on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral approaches (Bennett, 2009); (b) the final outcome of intercultural competence should be effective and appropriate communication; (c) intercultural competence should encompass essential competencies that individuals can acquire irrespective of the essential features of their cultures.

The intercultural communication entails having a general agreement on essential components of skills. The focus on theorizing has not essentially rendered practical findings to explicitly measure levels of intercultural competence. For instance, Bennett (2009) proved that there has been a tremendous focus on cognitive skills, without adequate emphasis on affective or behavioral skills. Simultaneously, necessary theorizing should be ongoing because several students keep being engaged in international education programs and are consequently incessantly subjected to conditions that could enhance their intercultural competence. As such, the effective collaboration between intercultural scholars and international education authorities could improve the internationalization programs and measures (Liu & Dall'Alba, 2012).

Intercultural understanding includes both cognitive and affective aspects. The cognitive aspect of intercultural understanding encompasses information about one's culture and the cultures of others (Hill, 2006). It also includes knowledge about the comparisons and contrasts between cultures (Hill, 2006). Positive attitudes

including empathy and respect of other cultures are also critical (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Awada et al., 2018; Deardorff, 2006; Heyward, 2002; Hill, 2006).

Therefore, this study has intended to investigate what relative effect could using cooperative learning instruction together with the use of blogs in comparison with the regular instruction have in decreasing the intercultural communication apprehension of university learners. As such, the present study used the Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA) adapted from Neuliep and McCroskey (1997). The PRICA included 14 statements that are comments frequently made by people with regard to communication with people from other cultures. The PRICA suggests that the intercultural communication apprehension is a subcategory of general communication apprehension. Furthermore, the study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of the suggested model in improving the perceptions of university learners of the intercultural communication experience. As such, the present study intended to address the affective factors by addressing the effect of the suggested study model on decreasing apprehension. Furthermore, the study intended to investigate the effect of the suggested model on improving the learners' perceptions of the learning experience by conducting research projects about different cultures.

The individual's affective reaction to intercultural difference has been called "intercultural sensitivity" (Straffon, 2003, p. 488), and it has been theorized as the affective feature of intercultural communication competence (Chen & Starosta, 2000) and as the individual experience of cultural differences. It is theorized as a significant element of intercultural competence (Hammer et al., 2003), whereby the improved intercultural sensitivity might cause an improved intercultural competence.

A distinct and widespread set of theory and research exists about the communication feature of intercultural competence. Intercultural communication happens when great and significant cultural differences make different explanations and prospects about how to communicate effectively (Lustig & Koester, 2006), and it has been considered the ability to effectively and appropriately interact with people from different cultures (Arasaratnam, 2009). Theorizing intercultural communication necessitates the integration of culture into communication theory, a task that has been approached in several ways (Gudykunst, 2005). Nevertheless, theorizing intercultural communication is not an easy task due to the intrinsic difficulty of theorizing "culture" itself and the fact that there are levels of changeability and differences within a culture and among cultures (Perry & Southwell, 2011).

The study was the first study that investigated the effect of cooperative learning-based groups and blog instruction in decreasing the intercultural communication apprehension of university learners and improving their perceptions of the learning experience.

Methodology

The study used a pretest-, posttest, control group design, with both a quantitative and a qualitative study. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were used to address the questions raised in the PRICA, along with the semantic analysis of the reflection logs provided by the control and experimental group participants.

Participants

The participants of the study were 4 groups of students ($N=102$) of two American Universities in Beirut who were randomly assigned to control and experimental conditions. The experimental group included 30 males and 24 females; the control group sample included 30 males and 18 females. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 23 years in both groups. From all the participants, 22 were half-Lebanese who used to live abroad, and 10 were non-Lebanese of 7 different cultures. A total of 54 experimental participants and 48 control participants were sampled in the present study. Participants were enrolled in the Advanced Rhetoric course, whereby students were asked to conduct a research project to compare Lebanon with any other country such as Syria, Pakistan, Rwanda, South Africa, Spain, Singapore, Norway, Sweden, Italy, Brazil, and United States of America based on the culture and nationality of one of the participants in each group. One of the two American universities, which constituted the setting of the present study, had 22% of the university's international student population representing 90 countries. The second American university had student population as follows: Lebanon: 6,99382%, rest of Middle East: 5916.9%, North America: 4505.3%, Europe and Caucasus: 2272.7%.

The experimental conditions included the implementation of the blog instruction and cooperative learning small groups, whereas participants in the control group were given the regular research project instruction with no blog collaboration or cooperative learning small groups' mediation. All the participants were native speakers of different languages who received the treatment for a period of 10 weeks while receiving instruction at a rate of 3 hours per week.

One hundred and two students had been assigned the successful fulfillment of the course with a fundamental requirement: presenting a project comparing two cultures.

Treatment

The researchers informed the participants about the purpose of the study, and the participants gave their consent to participate in the study. Then, the experimental group students were divided into 13 small culturally mixed cooperative learning groups; 11 groups consisted of 4 members each, and 2 groups consisted

of 5 members each. They had to work on their research projects using the blog to post their work and to give and receive feedback from the other students and the teacher. Students were asked to form their own groups provided that each group includes participants of different cultures. Then, one of the researchers created the intercultural communication blog and sent invitations to the experimental group participants ($n = 54$) who, in turn, accepted the invitations and became blog authors as well. Both the experimental and control group participants were asked to conduct a research project that was a major, graded course requirement. The control group participants received the regular instruction and were asked to develop a project that presented a comparison between the Lebanese culture and any other culture they might choose. The experimental group participants were requested to conduct projects comparing and contrasting the Lebanese culture to that of the non-Lebanese student enrolled in each small group. In both cases (experimental and control group), the researcher asked each group to prepare a research project entailing the similarities and the differences between the two selected cultures. Moreover, the researchers asked each group to present recommendations on strengthening the intercultural communication skills based on their experiences. This experiment lasted for 10 weeks.

Before starting and after completing the research project, both groups, the control and the experimental, were asked to fill out the PRICA survey. The participants in both groups were also asked to write reflection logs reflecting the strengths and weaknesses of the experience and the recommendations they proposed to improve the intercultural communication skills.

Research Instruments

This study used two instruments:

1. The PRICA designed by and adapted from Neuliep and McCroskey (1997). This measure was developed to address communication apprehension in the intercultural context. This instrument is substantially correlated with the PRCA24 (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997) that indicates that the intercultural communication apprehension is a subcategory of general communication apprehension. The alpha reliability estimates should be expected to be greater than .90 (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). The PRICA included 14 statements frequently made by people with regard to communication with people from other cultures. Using Likert scale, the participants had to indicate how much they agreed with the 14 statements by marking a number representing their response to each statement using the following choices: 1 = *Strongly disagree*; 2 = *Disagree*; 3 = *are Neutral*; 4 = *Agree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*.

Table 1. Summary of Control Group Intercultural Apprehension Scores.

Source	df	M
Control pretest	1	57.95833
Control posttest	1	48.60417

PRICA survey, Neuliep and McCroskey (1997), was used at the beginning and upon the completion of the experiment to report students’ perception changes of the intercultural communication experience.

2. An analysis of the reflection logs of participants was conducted. Many researchers consider surveys ineffective in reporting the reasons for participants’ choice of responses (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). For this reason, the researchers of the present study compensated for this shortcoming by using three open-ended questions that were sent to the researchers via e-mail.

The data were collected and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively using the two analyses of covariance tests and the content analysis of the reflection logs.

Results

Quantitative Results

The quantitative results of this research were intended to answer the first research question: What is the relative effect of using the cooperative learning instruction and blogs’ methodology in comparison with the regular instruction in decreasing the intercultural communication apprehension of university learners?

The PRICA survey consisted of 14 items designed to measure intercultural apprehension (see Appendix). To compute the PRICA survey overall score, two sets of scores were added: the scores for the Items 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, and 12 on one hand; the scores for the Items 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, and 14 on the other hand (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). The alpha reliability estimates should be expected to be greater than .90 (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). After this had been done, we applied the PRICA formula: 42- total score 1 + total score 2.

The results in both control and experimental groups are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

PRICA survey stated that scores could range from 14 to 70. Scores lower than 32 indicate low intercultural CA; scores greater than 52 indicate high

Table 2. Summary of Experimental Group Intercultural Apprehension Scores.

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>M</i>
Experimental pretest	1	57.98077
Experimental posttest	1	28.26923

Table 3. Analysis of Covariance Summary of Intercultural Apprehension Scores.

Source	Sum of squares	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	Partial η^2
Pretest	3.128	1	3.128	0.220	.003
Method	7649.956	1	7649.956	538.790**	.869
Error	1150.071	84	14.198		

** $p < .00$.

intercultural CA; scores ranging between 32 and 52 indicate a moderate level of intercultural communicative apprehension (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). The analysis of covariance for experimental versus control intercultural apprehension posttest scores, after having controlled for pretest scores existing differences, was found to be statistically significant in favor of the experimental group, $F(1, 84) = 538.79$, $p < .00$, $\eta^2 = .86$ as shown in Table 3.

The mean scores and standard deviations of the intercultural apprehension scores for the experimental and control groups were 28.26 ($SD = 3.96$) and 47.96 ($SD = 3.36$), respectively. This means that the participants in experimental group were less apprehensive about intercultural communication than their counterparts in the control group after the experiment.

Qualitative Results

The researcher sent the students a three open-question questionnaire via e-mail. In this section, we have organized the answers in logs for the different questions to find an answer for the second research question: What is the relative effect of using cooperative learning and blog instruction in comparison with the regular instruction in improving the perceptions of university learners of the intercultural communication experience?

The researchers mapped out general categories to categorize the responses according to dominant themes. Then, the researchers created subcategories underneath the general ones. The researchers sampled the most reoccurring themes popping up within each general category. Then, the researchers grouped and tagged themes together to create new subcategories. Because some responses were assigned to multiple categories, the percentages could not add

up to 100. Forty-five percent of the participants indicated that the study suggested model facilitated communication; 34% indicated that the model enabled them to explore different point of views about different cultures and to explore new cultures and ideas; 38% indicated that the model could be needed for improving intercultural communication; 25% indicated developing awareness of one's culture; 15% indicated that the model was significant for receiving genuine information; 22% stressed that the model enabled them to cross easily cultural boundaries; 38% indicated that the blog could function as a platform for people's thoughts and beliefs; 45% indicated that the model could achieve intercultural communication when using a blog.

The most common responses were as follows:

- The blog enhanced the intercultural communication between my peers and me.
- Using the blog facilitated communication between us. It made the task easier.
- It allowed us to talk about different cultures and read other comments. It helped us to know the different point of views about different cultures through these comments.
- It helped us in thinking about this subject, and it improved our intercultural communication.
- It developed our point of view regarding our culture, in addition to others.
- The information you receive are genuine, for it flows from the sender to the receiver without the intervention of a third party.
- The material is out there for anyone, so it is guaranteed to extend the base of people crossing cultural boundaries.
- The advice is easily found. The advice is from natives, and it can help to make you comfortable with any conversation with a person of the same culture of the one who handed you the advice.
- Using a blog can help people express their points of view and find people from all over the world who share same ideas and beliefs.
- It helps on exploring new cultures and ideas.
- The blog would serve as a platform for people's thoughts and beliefs, and sharing different points of view.
- Using the blog too (to) talk about cultures enables people from all over the world to access it and because its (it is) about cultures and places, if someone (people) want to know about a culture, they can just read about it online instead of buying a physical book or have to travel to the country to learn about it.
- Using a blog to express your opinions opens avenues to others who might have believed that the doors were closed, and there were not any other options to explore. Furthermore, these people might change their way of thinking and try other methods.

- Intercultural communication is easily achieved when using a blog because people all over the world have a chance to view what other cultures believe and their practices when it comes to certain cultural issues.
- In response to Question 2 of the questionnaire: Are there weaknesses for using the cooperative learning and blog instruction model in conducting the research project? In case of affirmation, what are they? As for the negative impacts of the blog on the intercultural connection, the responses mapped out indicated the following findings:

Twenty-four percent indicated that the blog might render a sense of bias to the natives of a certain culture; 17% indicated that people might misconceive the information; 15% believed that the blog might create a conflict of misconception; 11% claimed that the bloggers might not give accurate information; 11% believed that the model could be ineffective because only bloggers voice their opinions; 7% believed that the blog could prevent socialization; 11% believed that the model might render intercultural communication that could affect their identity; 11% believed that the information received might be from a faker due to the lack of face-to-face communication; 7% believed that the model might be ineffective because the blog could need to be updated often; 21% claimed that the suggested model might be ineffective as a blog could present more potential for discrimination; 22% indicated that the study suggested model might cause challenging communication due to language and cultural barriers.

Below are some of the most common participants' responses:

- As for the negative impacts of the blog on the intercultural connection, it (the blog) may get the students in the trap where they would present a comparison between the two cultures with a sense of bias to their native one. This would alter the significance of the information and consequently diminish (diminishes) the aim of the blog.
- People would misconceive the information they read while others may find hardship in delivering their piece of evidence in the suitable platform.
- It would initiate a conflict of misconception, which will cause the misleading of the goal of the blog in accomplishing intercultural connections.
- The disadvantages are that when certain cultures show their practices, others might view that culture as an oppressed one. This leads them to have a closed mind toward that group of people because not accurate information is given because its (it is) all (about) people's opinions. Also, others may post information that is not a true reflection of the culture.
- The blog does have few disadvantages; it does permits for few people to voice their opinion only. Moreover, we need to widen the compass for our opinions to reach more people, and we should have the facility to interact with the people who read our posts.

- It prevents socialization; people will stick to their phones or laptops instead of having a real conversation regarding this topic.
- Some people of certain cultures would be affected by other cultures and by that they would adopt other practices; this could affect their identity, and this would backfire against them. They would be criticized by their societies. Also, once all cultures are open to each other's, some minor societies' habits and practices might dissolve in major ones.
- The information you receive may be valid for a small part of the other culture's community and not for it as a whole. This may cause confusion.
- The information you receive may be from a faker who pretends he belongs to the culture you seek information on. This is due to the lack of face-to-face communication.
- Using the blog, however, would need to be updated often to keep it up to date.
- Just like any other intercultural workplace, a blog presents more potential for discrimination. It is natural that if you put people with different behaviors together, they could turn against each other.
- Although global communication is usually a benefit, internal communication is typically more challenging when you have language and cultural barriers. This is why a blog with multicultural participants have more obstacles to overcome.

In response to Question 3 of the questionnaire: Based on your review of the posted projects, what recommendations do you give to your peers to strengthen the intercultural communication between the Lebanese and the non-Lebanese?

Fifty-five percent of the participants indicated that involvement is needed to improve the intercultural communication; 42% recommended breaking assumptions; 64% recommended understanding each other; 48% recommended ensuring equality; 48% recommended accepting differences; 11% recommended avoiding racism; 11% recommended avoiding stereotyping; 25% recommended staying patient; 34% recommended understanding body language; 45% recommended choosing words wisely.

The most common responses were as follows:

- **Involvement:** To understand each other's cultures, Lebanese and Italians should work together to establish a bond between the two cultures that enables communication.
- **Breaking assumptions:** Every society has its own ways of living according to their cultures and traditions. However, Lebanese and Italian individuals should take into consideration that the way they communicate is not universal and does not apply to the other community.
- **Understanding each other:** This aspect involves an individual putting himself or herself in the shoes of other people from other cultures and try to think and communicate in their way.

- Ensuring equality: As one knows, Italian and Lebanese cultures differ in many ways. To achieve intercultural communication between the two, individuals from each culture must treat each other equally and feel superior to the other.
- Accepting differences: Each society is built according to its values and cultures. Moreover, each individual, whether Italian or Lebanese, tries to protect his or her culture at all costs. Therefore, it is important to accept that the two cultures differ and avoid attacking the other culture as improper.
- Avoiding racism: One should always be aware of what he or she talks when communicating with people from different cultures and should be wise enough not to sound racist or disrespectful.
- Avoiding stereotyping: Stereotyping a certain culture can prove to be offensive to both parties and that would worsen the communication between the two.
- Staying patient: Debates between two different cultures can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. What is accepted in Italy might not be accepted in the Lebanese society and vice versa. One should always keep the patience to avoid awkward moments.
- Body language: One way to master communication skills with foreign people is to have the right body language. Maintaining eye contact, for example, proves that one is interested and therefore improves communication skills.
- Choosing words wisely: Every language, whether Italian or Arabic, has its slang. Using slang in front of a foreigner might prove to be disrespectful and confusing because he or she might feel offended. Sticking to the correct grammar would be more effective in securing a healthy conversation with a foreigner. Intercultural communication is very important especially in our modern world, so these are the recommendations I propose to improve this exchange between cultures.

Discussion and Implications

The present study intended to investigate the perceptions of the intercultural communication between the learners of Lebanese and non-Lebanese cultures; specifically, the study intended to investigate how students might change their attitudes and perceptions upon the communication with their peers of different cultures through blogs. The research also aimed at investigating if this specific methodology would help to decrease apprehension in the intercultural communication.

The findings of the present study have proved that although both experimental and control groups had a lower level of apprehension toward intercultural communication after the course, in the experimental group, we could observe a significant change: While the control group had moved from a high to a

moderate intercultural communication level of comprehension, the experiment group has changed from a high to a low level.

About the perceptions of the students have about this methodology, the qualitative results have shown that the students believe that this model enhances intercultural communication, facilitates communication, gives them answers to cultural doubts by real natives, and helps them share their ideas with people all over the world. However, students also showed the weaknesses of this method. According to their questionnaires, this methodology may bring misunderstandings on the goal of the blog because there have been some cultural shocks when learning about others' customs. Some of them also believe that the information they receive does not represent the whole community or it even may come from a faker. For this reason, the student recommendations were basically finding more involvement among members of the different cultures, understanding each other's culture (and thus not feeling superior or better), accepting differences, avoiding racism and stereotyping, and learning to be respectful when writing opinions. [AQ: Please note that the paragraphs starting "The present study intended to investigate the perceptions. . ."; "The findings of the present study have proved that although both experimental. . ."; and "About the perceptions of the students have about this methodology. . ." have been repeated twice, and hence the latter have been deleted. Kindly confirm.]

The findings of the study align with those of Salazar and Agüero (2016) and Tirado-Morueta et al. (2018) that have indicated that intercultural communication competence is a necessity for constructing the interactions in the globalized community and the current economic and technological developments demand, ensuring intercultural communication skills. Furthermore, the study results corroborate those of Buchs et al. (2017) that showed the effectiveness of cooperative learning as a dynamic method characterized by reduced anxiety, increased safety, freedom, and tolerance on improving learners' perceptions of learning. The findings also endorsed those of Ware, 2013 and Ware and Rivas, 2012 that indicated the effectiveness of the blog instruction in improving intercultural communication skills.

In alignment with the findings of Furnham and Bochner (1982), the findings of the present study have proved that the interaction and engagement of the local and international students in communication through blogging has enhanced the individual learning, intercultural communication, social mixing, and interconnection between local and international learners. The existence of international students on university campus ensures an exceptional social forum for improving all students' experiences and understanding of the fruitfulness of other cultures. In agreement with Volet and Ang (2012), the present study asserted the significance of ensuring educational contexts for the local and international learners so that both the local and international students will be open to new forms of learning. Nevertheless, the results of the study also show that

the effective intercultural communication can be achieved only if both parties are ready to make it work.

The findings of the study also align with those of Chai et al., 2012; Ifinedo, 2017; Kuo et al., 2017 that indicate that students see blogs as a collaborative learning tool that fosters communication, and its use is therefore seen as a very positive technique. Using blogs as pedagogical tools for fostering intercultural communication necessitates the need to exchange, react, and encourage external participation. The present study adds to the research of Ai (2017) and Li (2018) that has focused on the vital role of technology in improving perceptions of learning.

The findings corroborate those of Awada et al. (2018); Deardorff (2006); Lustig and Koester (2006); Perry and Southwell (2011) that assert that there is an agreement among most scholars that intercultural competence can be defined as the ability to successfully and appropriately interact in an intercultural setting.

Conversely, the findings of the study did not align with those of Zeng and Harris (2005), Xie and Sharma (2005), and Ellison and Wu (2008) that revealed reasons for the negative perceptions of some learners, the inability to handle technology and technological troubleshoots and resentment for writing in general, desire to find a way to keep the privacy of the blog posts and not to make them public, and the dislike of giving or receiving comments or the discomfort to send or receive peer feedback. Furthermore, the results of the study also show that the effective intercultural communication can be achieved only if both parties are ready to make it work.

Conclusions

This study contributes to literature because it is the first study that investigated the effect of a suggested model needed to decrease intercultural communication and to improve the university learners' perceptions of research projects in an advanced writing course. The suggested model in this study consisted of culturally mixed cooperative learning structure and blog instruction. The study was implemented in classrooms that include Lebanese and non-Lebanese participants at two universities in Lebanon.

Therefore, the community sharing theory framed this study as well because the experimental group participants effectively communicated in groups using the globalized community forum ensured by the blog. The cognitive-motivational theory on self-regulation and adaptable learning framed this study as the experimental learners showed improved perceptions of the learning experience.

The study was the first study that investigated the effect of cooperative learning-based groups and blog instruction in decreasing the intercultural communication apprehension of university learners and improving their perceptions

of the experience. The findings of the study indicated that the intercultural communication competence is a necessity for constructing the interactions in the globalized community. Cooperative learning is a component of the suggested model investigated in this study because it is a dynamic method characterized by reduced anxiety, increased safety, freedom, and tolerance for one another as valuable group members. This study the PRICA survey, designed by Neuliep and McCroskey (1997), which was developed to address communication apprehension in the intercultural context.

Cooperative language learning helped students develop communicative competence. Furthermore, the study proved the effectiveness of the blog as the second main component of the adopted model, which indicated the vital role of technology in general in improving perceptions of learning.

The findings proved that the use of cooperative learning instruction through the use of blogs in culturally mixed groups improves the intercultural communication competence and decreases intercultural communication apprehension among language students.

However, we also believe that further research should be conducted to investigate this type of activity more in depth as well as its results in specific tasks such as exchanging ideas, giving recommendations, and explaining experiences among students as well as instructors.

Limitations of the Study

One notable limitation of this study is that the quantitative results of this study derive from an evaluation rubric that, while accessible to control group participants, was not systematically exploited by them during the writing process. Unlike the experimental group participants, it was left for those in the control group to use the rubrics as they saw fit. It would be instructive to see how well a control group would perform with more systematic attention paid to the rubrics without all of the other support provided by the suggested model.

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Supplemental Material

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