

Blog and Intercultural Grouping Effect on Learners' Perceptions of Intercultural Communication Projects

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of integrating Blog Assisted Language Learning (BALL) and small culturally -mixed group work on improving the perceptions of intercultural communication and writing research projects of university students (n=102) of different cultures enrolled in Advanced Rhetoric classrooms in two American universities during a 16-week period. The study employed Pre-test/Post-test control group design whereby the experimental group participants received the treatment encompassing the integration of blog-mediated instruction and culturally-mixed group work and the control group received regular research instruction. Data were collected using two surveys. The findings proved that the treatment was effective in improving the experimental group perceptions of the intercultural communication and writing research projects whereas the control group did not show similar improvement.

Keywords: *Blog, Culturally-mixed group work, Intercultural communication, Perceptions*

1. Introduction

Technology facilitates learning (Inuma 2016). One example of employing technology to teach communicative writing is using Web 2.0 media, which might be feasible when an interesting project is implemented over a long period of time. Web 2.0 special search features in particular, namely Technorati, Feedster, PubSub, Waypath, and BlogPulse motivate bloggers and enable them to make their posts searchable by content and tags, receive updates using search keywords, follow a search, generate posts, and visualize trends within blogospheric focus (Stevenson and Liu, 2010). However, training in the use of Web 2.0 would be necessary to enhance their foreign language communicative writing skills (Chen, Shih and Liu 2015).

Another example of using technology to teach writing is Blog-Assisted Language Learning (BALL). Research has shown that "blog-based peer feedback had a statistically significant positive correlation with learners' motivation, collaboration, and course satisfaction. The findings also revealed that the feedback was conducive to learners' self-reflection and self-confidence in L2 writing and could give rise to an enhanced L2 writing experience" (Zhang, Song, Shen and Huang, 2014, p.670). Moreover, Intelligent Computer-Assisted Language Learning (ICALL) could increase learners' motivation and collaboration. ICALL environment might also improve the structure and mechanics of learners' writing (Ai 2017), especially that the web-based collaborative writing tasks might enhance the university learners' writing scores which would in turn improve their perceptions of the writing experience (Bikowski and Vithanage, 2016). As such, the practice of intergroup communication might develop learners' intercultural communication skills and improve their perceptions of intercultural communication. Group-based projects that are conducted by employing BALL might immerse learners in the process of vigorous knowledge building as they provide them with different opportunities to acquire knowledge from each other through communicating, giving and receiving feedback before making their own decisions (Liu and Dall'Alba 2012).

Conversely, some research indicates that collaborative writing might not provide accurate information about the quantity and quality of writing in online environments (Yim and Warschauer 2017). As such, research further shows that technology might not help language teachers motivate learners who need training in the use of technology for teaching (Borthwick and Gallagher-Brett 2014). Studies have also demonstrated that intercultural communication apprehension hinders intercultural communication (Fall, Kelly, MacDonald, Primm and Holmes 2013; Chen, 2010) although the exposure to intercultural communication might increase cultural competence since individuals might acquire knowledge about their culture and that of others through interactive communication with people from different cultures and through understanding the differences among cultures (Furcsa, 2009). Due to contradictory data yielded by the existing plethora of literature and since perception is a multidisciplinary concept, which is originally derived from cognitive science and psychology, the present study intends to investigate the effectiveness of BALL and culturally-mixed group work in improving university students' perceptions of intercultural communication and writing project experience.

1.1 Background of the Study

The review of some Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning (EUROCALL), Language Learning and Technology (LL andT), and Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium (CALICO), second language learning literature identified the need to conduct the present study which hypothesizes that integrating blog-mediated instruction and small culturally-mixed group work would improve the intercultural skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university learners who have different cultural backgrounds and they are involved in research projects pertinent to a writing course. Accordingly, this study assumes that integrating BALL along with small culturally -mixed group work might improve the university students' perceptions of both intercultural communication and writing research projects. The study rationale emerges from the meta-analysis of the literature, which asserted that the current technological developments require intercultural communication skills (Salazar and Agüero 2016) that can take place within the framework of at least two distinct cultures. Intercultural communication can be considered a major component of the digital age and one of the twenty-first century skills that should be viewed within different contexts. The study rationale also builds on the findings of Fall et al. (2013) which indicated that a blog could improve intergroup communication; this in turn would develop learners' intercultural communication skills and improve their perceptions of intercultural communication. It also builds on the findings of Chong (2010) which asserted that a blog develops learners' research skills and on the findings of Liu and Dall'Alba (2012) who found that group-based projects completed using blogs may immerse learners in the process of vigorous knowledge building. Accordingly, this study hypothesizes that integrating blog-mediated instruction and small culturally mixed group work might improve the perceptions of university learners who have different cultural backgrounds of intercultural communication and writing research projects.

1.2 Significance of the study

A few studies have focused on multiculturalism and technology-enhanced language learning, yet this study is significant being the first to investigate the effect of a small culturally-mixed group and blog-mediated instruction on improving the Lebanese EFL university learners' perceptions of research skills and intercultural communication. Moreover, this study employs Pre-test/Post-test control group design to investigate whether the use of blogs improves perceptions of writing research projects and decreases intercultural communication apprehension of students by providing opportunities for publishing

written drafts and giving and receiving peer and teacher feedback. It also reports recommendations that students proposed to strengthen intercultural communication skills among the Lebanese and students from different cultures whom they chose to communicate with.

1.3 Research questions

The following research questions have guided this study:

1. Does the implementation of the blog mediated instruction and culturally mixed group work in comparison with the regular instruction given to the control group participants improve the experimental group participants' perceptions of intercultural communication?
2. Does the implementation of the blog mediated instruction and culturally mixed group work in comparison with the regular instruction given to the control group participants improve the experimental group participants' perceptions of writing projects?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Building knowledge through communication using small group-based projects

Group work facilitates discussions and debates among students, motivates them to engage in semantic construction and promotes peer and group cooperative learning. A study conducted by Van Berkel and Schmidt (2000) involved 1300 undergraduate students who were assigned to small groups and asked to communicate for a period of six weeks. Results revealed that the knowledge gained through exchanging opinions with peers in the same small group provided opportunities for students to generate diverse ways of solving the same problem and resulted in enhanced learning outcomes (Liu and Dall'Alba, 2012). Moreover, a study including clinical students also proved that group-based activities promoted problem-solving skills and were effective activities that facilitated gaining clinical skills (Steinert 2004).

Group work also enhances professional skills through facilitating the processes of negotiating and assigning suitable roles, dramatizing the tasks, and managing progress for the period of the project to honor deadlines while working on group assignments. Group work is also effective in promoting student's responsibility for learning and enhancing self-awareness of knowledge attainment (Goldsmith, Stewart and Ferguson 2006; Seethamraju and Borman, 2009). Furthermore, working in groups provides significant opportunities for the promotion of self-development, interactive progress, and peer cooperation (Cartney and Rouse 2006). Group work is also effective in improving student retention and in improving learning (Taylor and Bedford 2004).

2.2 Blog Assisted Language Learning (BALL) as means to enhance intercultural communication skills

Blogs can be defined as individual webpages. They are considered as a pedagogical tool to increase knowledge in a given target language (Melo-Pfeifer 2015) and develop reading and writing skills.

Blogs can also be used within traditional foreign language (FL) teaching as a tool to continue the activities and tasks outside the classroom. Blogs could also be utilized to create and develop broad learning communities consisting of students and an anonymous audience (Lamy and Hampel 2007), develop intercultural communication skills (Tome, 2007) and improve writing competences (Arslan and Sahin-Kizil 2010; Lee 2011). Thus, blogs enhance collaboration, promote teaching, and encourage learning in formal and informal contexts. They also expedite interaction with authors of and actors of other blogs (Melo-Pfeifer 2015).

Pedagogical blogs include features of communication and socialization. Such features allow the participation of learners in authentic writing activities which enable students to demonstrate awareness of writing to a specific audience. Pedagogical blogs promote the teaching and learning of languages and cultures and the development of plurilingual competence (PC) and intercultural competence (IC), which are essential components for pedagogical interaction, language teaching, and learning activities (Melo-Pfeifer 2015).

Moreover, blogging could develop learners' critical thinking abilities (Coutinho 2007; Ellison and Wu, 2008; Zeng and Harris 2005), improve their attitudes and perceptions, and hone their affective skills (Kerawalla et al., 2008). Nackerud and Scaletta (2008) reported that undergraduate and graduate learners used a blog at the University to maintain interaction and communication mainly with their peers. Moreover, blogs can be very helpful when used as research diaries to plan their steps and receive peer and teacher feedback on them (Chong 2010).

Still some people are against the use of blogs for educational purposes. The negative perceptions of blogging may be attributed to unfamiliarity with technology, the desire to keep the content of blog posts confidential, time constraints, and dislike of giving or receiving peer feedback. However, Ellison and Wu (2008) suggested practical solutions to address some participants' concerns about privacy, namely using the options of blogging within the medium of password protection or asking learners to interact and collaborate without using their real names.

3. Methods

This study was conducted in Advanced Rhetoric classrooms of two reputable American universities located in Beirut, Lebanon. Many Lebanese, non-Lebanese, or half Lebanese students of different majors register for this advanced writing course before they continue their education in their respective fields of study. All Advanced Rhetoric classes followed the same English language curriculum, and the course was taught over 3 contact hours per week for 16 weeks. The fulfillment of the writing course involved writing a research paper whose purpose was to enhance students' writing skills. The rationale for using the blog and the culturally mixed group work in the experimental group was to enhance students' perceptions of learning about different cultures while allowing them to construct new knowledge as they worked in culturally mixed groups. Learners would be extrinsically motivated to work and collaborate when the blog is an integral, mandatory part of the course (Ellison and Wu, 2008) as they want to have good grades. Accordingly, the researchers decided to create a blog to enhance students' perceptions of intercultural communication and writing research projects. Moreover, using the blog allowed students to benefit from their peers' feedback while inserting images, uploading videos, and publishing texts to express their thoughts and emotions.

To elicit students' perceptions, the researchers developed two surveys; survey 1 and survey 2. Both control and experimental group participants filled out the two surveys. Based on the four components of the intercultural sensitivity training plan developed by Brislin and Yoshida (1994), the researchers developed survey 1 that aimed at investigating the participants' perceptions of intercultural communication (see Appendix A). Furthermore, based on the research paper rubric adapted from Whalen (n.d.), the researchers developed survey 2 that aimed at investigating the participants' perceptions of writing a research paper. The control and experimental participants' reactions towards the statements encompassed in survey 2 that entailed the following five aspects: 1) integration of knowledge, 2) focus of topic, 3) depth of discussion, 4) cohesiveness, and 5) presentation of arguments were used to assess the participants' perceptions of writing research papers (see Appendix B).

3.1 Participants

Participants included five intact writing classes of the Advanced Rhetoric course. These five classes included 26 students from different cultures and nationalities. Participants were people who lived for over 5 years in Lebanon or in other countries. The experimental and control groups comprised Lebanese who were born and raised in Lebanon, half Lebanese whose mother was non-Lebanese and were raised for over 7 years in the country of origin of the mother and non-Lebanese whose both parents were non-Lebanese and came to Lebanon through scholarship exchange programs. Thus, a total of 102 students were sampled: 54 students (Lebanese, half-Lebanese, and non-Lebanese) constituted the experimental group and 48 students formed the control group (Lebanese, half-Lebanese, and non-Lebanese). The experimental group encompassed 12 half Lebanese and 4 non-Lebanese whereas the control group encompassed 7 half Lebanese and 3 non-Lebanese. To illustrate, students chose to compare Lebanon with, Kurdistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Rwanda, Greece, Spain, Singapore, Russia, Italy, France and United States of America based on the culture and nationality of one of the members in each group. In the two sampled American universities, which formed the setting of the present study, over 26% of the entire student population was international, with over 75 nationalities represented. Students' age ranged from 20 to 24 years old. Fifty-eight participants were males and 44 were females. All the participants were bilingual, and some were trilingual. All the international students in both the experimental and control groups had some knowledge of other languages like Turkish, French, English, Italian, Pakistani, Russian, Spanish, Greek, Rwandan, Singaporean and Kurdish, and all of them learned English as a foreign language or a second language. The language of the previous participants' education was Turkish, French, English, Italian, Pakistani, Russian, Spanish, Greek, Rwandan, Singaporean or Kurdish.

3.2 Treatment

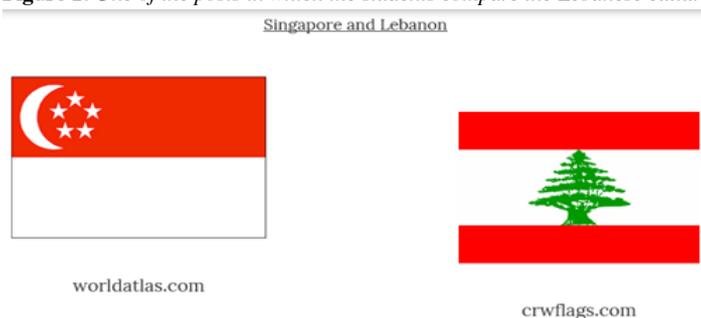
At the beginning of the semester, both the experimental and control groups were asked to carry out a research project about the significance of mass media in shaping people's perceptions. Without working in groups and without using the blog to present their work and to comment on each other's work, students' overall research proficiency was measured prior to the treatment, and no significant differences in scores were reported.

The control group participants received regular research instruction on how to write a research paper. They were asked to present their research comparing between their culture and that of the Lebanese culture without working in groups and without using the blog to present their work and to comment on each other's work. On the other hand, the experimental group students were given instruction pertinent to the target research and asked to use a semester-long blog project titled "Intercultural Communication" which was created after discussions with learners in the five writing classes of the Advanced Rhetoric course and developed in collaboration with the teachers and the students. The blog comprised 65 posts, was 5 pages long, and had 58 authors. It was used as a forum for collaboration in the experimental group classrooms while drafting, editing, and revising. After the experimental students received the blog instruction, they were assigned to work in groups that included Lebanese, half-Lebanese, and non-Lebanese participants. Feedback sessions were conducted using the blog features. The researchers created the blog on March 7, 2017. Furthermore, the blog formed a pool of resources since participants had access to the posts of other groups, which gave them the opportunity to compile, analyze and synthesize information needed for their own research projects. As such, the students provided each other with feedback, and they learned from the posted work of each other as well. Thus, the treatment condition entailed the integration of the blog along with the small culturally-mixed grouping.

The blog was initially thought of as a source of support, collaboration, presentation, and a peer evaluation model for FL classes that included students of different cultures. It was used for an average of three hours per week. The objectives and pedagogical purposes for creating the blog were to enhance intercultural communication by forming groups of two to five students of different nationalities to improve their research skills and to improve perceptions of intercultural communication while sharing their posts and being eager to read other groups' posts. The Web 2.0 blog features mentioned in the above literature enabled the participants to answer the posted questions in an organized manner and helped them to keep records of all the posted work. The researchers created the first five pages of the blog and invited the representatives of all experimental groups to become authors so that the representatives would agree with the other team members to edit pages, create posts and write comments on each other's work and on other students' work.

Experimental group students of the same class worked in collaboration with each other and then worked in collaboration with students in the other two classes. They worked in groups and shared their writings through the blog with their peers and the teachers. In the absence of restrictions on blog use, participants could examine the drafts and write comments at any time and place. Given that it was a class blog, all the students involved had their groups' representatives do the editorial obligation and fulfill the duty of the managers of the blog being authorized to edit, share, publish, update, insert, as well as add and delete postings. All experimental group participants acted as navigators of the blogosphere to develop tele-collaboration between the Lebanese and non-Lebanese students, increase cultural knowledge and develop actions and interactions (see Figures 1 and 2 below).

Figure 1: One of the posts in which the students compare the Lebanese culture to that of the Singaporean



- Culture & Religion:

The culture of Singapore is commonly known as where East meets West, it is influenced heavily by the different customs each ethnicity brings forth and is accepted and celebrated.

Furthermore, people in Singapore are usually seen as hardworking, career driven individuals. Due to the country's past, colonial rule, Japanese occupancy in World War 2, failed merger with Malaysia, the sheer size of the country and the lack of any form of natural resources; Singapore and Singaporeans had something to prove. As such, the pace in Singapore is very fast, constantly

Figure 2: Groups' posts showing comparison between Lebanese culture and other cultures

The screenshot shows the Blogger dashboard for a blog titled "Intercultural commun...". The left sidebar contains navigation options: View blog, Posts (All (65), Draft (15), Published (50)), Stats, Earnings, Campaigns, Pages, Layout, Theme, Settings, Reading List, and Help. The main content area displays a list of posts, each with a checkbox and a title:

- Lebanon versus Spain Since my early childhood my parents used to take me to Spain for Summer vacation every year. My uncle is married to a Spanish woman and lives in Madrid
- Comparison/contrast between Rwandan and Lebanese intercultural communications
- Intercultural communications between Lebanon and Turkey Intercultural communication is a discipline that studies communication across different cultures and social groups, or ho
- Similarities and Differences Between the Lebanese and Turkish Cultures Language is intrinsic to the expression of culture. As a means of communicating values, beliefs and cust
- Comparing Turkey to Lebanon Intercultural communication has a very wide presence globally. Having lived in Dubai all my life, I am well aware of the fact that no matter how close
- Foreign Students in Lebanon
- Greece Vs. Lebanon
- Lebanon and Turkey As we all know every country has its own culture that makes it different and unique from every other country. I visited Turkey many times and I was fascin
- Lebanon vs. Norway - Miriam Rita Boulos
- The cultural differences between Lebanon and Russia

The initial production was carried out by the students and teachers who also assumed the role of producers and participated in the production process by encouraging the students and making the corrections each learner highlighted in his/her peer's work. The researchers posted comments after teachers and/or students published their work with the aim to boost the blogosphere. A few students showed some anxiety when asked to manage the blog dynamics and interactions on behalf of their peers. As such, the representatives of the groups and the teachers carried together the task-design. Hence, the teachers' roles were decisive in encouraging students' autonomy. As such, the entire process of publishing was a collective experience. The texts used were fully discussed by the blog authors before they were published.

At the end of the treatment, a posttest was administered for both groups. The researchers in collaboration with the instructors of the writing classes agreed on the following prompt for the posttest: "Conduct a research project in which you present a comparison-contrast between the Lebanese culture and any other culture the students choose". This project was used to measure any changes in the experimental students' performance compared to that of the control group.

The two researchers of the present study analyzed the blog posts and comments. The two researchers were university-based teacher educators with a doctorate in Applied Linguistics. In order to ensure reliability, the two researchers along with the other three instructors who were holders of Master's degrees in Applied Linguistics used the same rubric (Appendix C) to grade the blog-based research paper along with the regular research papers of the control group participants.

At the end of the semester, survey 1 and survey 2 (see Appendixes A & B) were conducted to elicit the experimental and control groups' perceptions of intercultural communication and writing projects.

3.4 Data collection

Data for this study were collected using two surveys to investigate whether there were differences in the learners' perceptions of intercultural communication and the writing research. Survey 1 included 7 open-ended interview questions and one Likert scale item (see Appendix A). Survey 2 included 5 Likert scale items (see Appendix B). Survey 1 and survey 2 allowed a detailed analysis of performance outcomes that could be used to effectively investigate associations between the participants' experience and students' final products. Also, the experimental and control groups were asked to fill out the same perceptions survey before and after the experiment in order to observe whether the experimental group's perceptions were better than those of the control group.

3.5 Data analysis

Data were collected using the content analysis of the 7 open-ended items of survey 1, and a manual semantic analysis of the responses of the experimental group participants was carried out using the themes that emerged from the responses.

3.6 Theoretical Framework

The study was framed within the socio-constructivist approach to writing (Murray and Hourigan, 2008) where learners could carry out blog writing tasks, undertake knowledge construction in collaboration with peers, and assume responsibility for all joint productions (Lamy and Hampel, 2007). The study was also framed within community sharing theory (Engeström, 2001) which set the guidelines needed for the division of labor. Furthermore, the self-determination theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000a) was another framework for the study. SDT indicated that learners might be motivated to do blogging and to interact and communicate with each other due to an external factor, such as the fear of receiving a penalty or the promise of having rewards in return, such as high grades. Such learners were students who could act in accordance with extrinsic motivation. On the other hand, learners who could act due to internal influences, such as their desire to gain knowledge or their love for learning would be acting in accordance with intrinsic motivation. Accordingly, the participants' perceptions of intercultural communication with people of different cultures and of writing research projects might be improved due to the motivation factor which could be their main drive to act.

Furthermore, the present study was framed within the Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT) which considered diffusion as the medium "...by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels overtime among the members of a social system" (Rogers 1995: p.10) and the medium which

defined innovation as “an idea, practice or object that is perceived as new by the individual” (p.11). IDT proposed that the use and dissemination of innovative technologies could enable learners, institutions, and organizations to develop. The IDT has been used to investigate the effectiveness of information technology (IT) used by individuals or institutions and to ensure continuity of innovation, technology, and institutional features.

4. Results

4.1 Research question one

Research question one: Does the implementation of the blog mediated instruction and culturally mixed group work in comparison with the regular instruction given to the control group participants improve the experimental group participants’ perceptions of intercultural communication?

Survey 1 reflected the positive perceptions of the experimental group participants of the intercultural communication experience in comparison with those of their control group counterparts.

Tables 1 and 2 reported respectively the control and experimental participants’ perceptions of effective intercultural communication. Figure 3 summed up the comparison between the perceptions of both groups.

Tables 3 and 4 reported respectively the control and experimental participants’ perceptions of the writing research projects’ experience in terms of 1) integration of knowledge, 2) focus of topic, 3) depth of discussion, 4) cohesiveness, 5) presentation of arguments. Figure 4 summed up the comparison between the perceptions of both groups.

Figure 3: Perception of Intercultural Communication

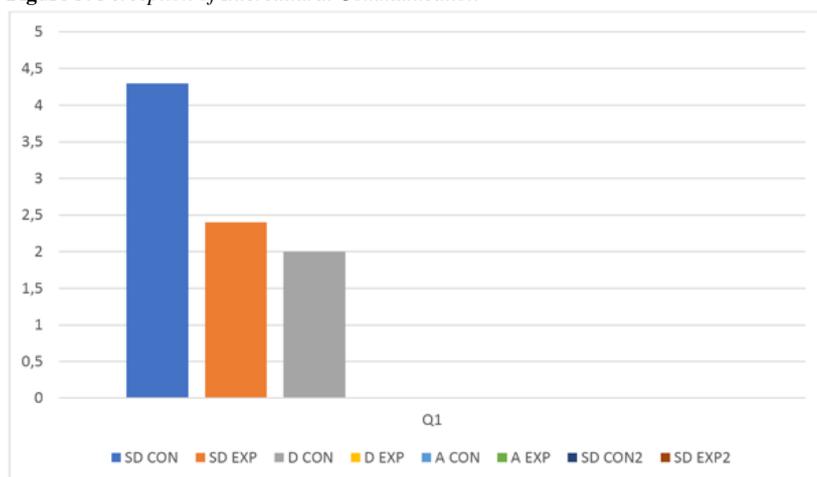


Table 1: Control Group Perceptions of Intercultural Communication

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Writing employing the classroom research instruction made me able to have effective intercultural communication	78%	0%	12%	10%

Table 2: Experimental Group Perceptions of Intercultural Communication

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Writing employing the classroom research instruction made me able to have effective intercultural communication	14%	8%	30%	48%

The comparison between the percentages of agreement and disagreement recorded for the reactions towards the six statements indicates that the perceptions of the experimental group participants towards the six statements are highly positive whereas those of the control group are negative.

4.2 Research question two

Research question two: Does the implementation of the blog mediated instruction and culturally mixed group work in comparison with the regular instruction given to the control group participants improve the experimental group participants’ perceptions of writing research projects?

Survey 2 items 1,2,3,4 and 5 reflected the positive perceptions of the experimental group participants of research skills in comparison with those of their control group counterparts.

Table 3 reported the perceptions of the control group participants’ reactions. The depth of discussion was the first highest component where 29% of the participants agreed, 20% strongly agreed with it, and the remaining 42 strongly disagreed and 9% disagreed. The focus of topic was the second highest component where 22% agreed and 20% strongly agreed. 56% strongly disagreed and 4% disagreed. Presentation of arguments was the third highest component where 22% agreed and 16 strongly agreed. 34% strongly disagreed and 28% disagreed. The fourth highest component was effective intercultural communication with 22 percent agreement (12 strongly agreed and 10 percent agreed) and 78% strongly disagreed and 0% disagreed. The

fifth highest component was integration of knowledge with 12% agreed and 8% strongly agreed. 64% strongly disagreed and 16% disagreed. The sixth highest component was cohesiveness with 8% agreed and 12% strongly agreed. 73% strongly disagreed and 9% disagreed.

Table 4 reported the perceptions of the experimental group participants' reactions. The cohesiveness was the first highest component where 40% of the participants agreed. 55% strongly agreed with it, and the remaining 14 strongly disagreed and 8% disagreed. The effective intercultural communication was the second highest component where 30% agreed and 48% strongly agreed. 56% strongly disagreed and 4% disagreed. Focus of topic was the third highest component where 12% agreed and 58% strongly agreed. 18% strongly disagreed and 12% disagreed. The fourth highest component was presentation with 12 percent agreement (12 strongly agreed and 51 percent agreed) and 20% strongly disagreed and 17% disagreed. The fifth highest component was integration of knowledge with 20% agreed and 20% strongly agreed. 24% strongly disagreed and 16% disagreed. The sixth highest component was depth of discussion with 5% agreed and 63% strongly agreed. 28% strongly disagreed and 4% disagreed.

Figure 4: Perceptions of Writing Projects

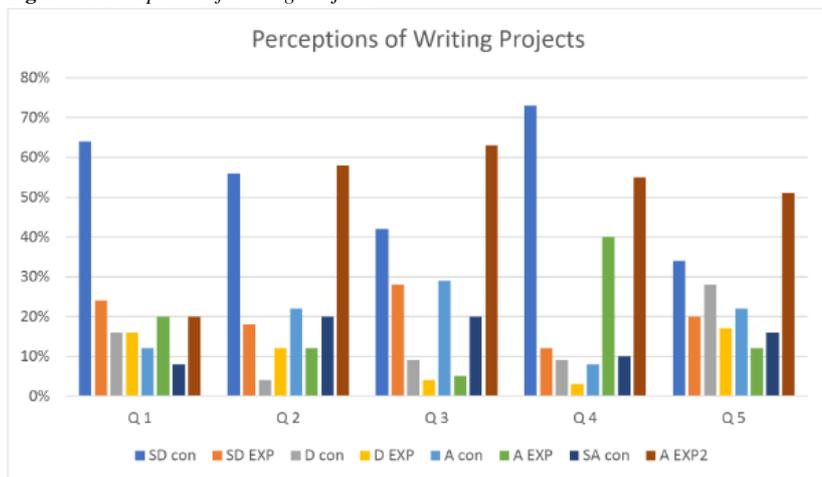


Table 3: Control Group perceptions of writing projects

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made me effectively integrate knowledge	64%	16%	12%	8%
2. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made the research topic focused.	56%	4%	22%	20%
3. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made research characterized by depth of discussion.	42%	9%	29%	20%
4. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made research cohesive.	73%	9%	8%	10%
5. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made me carefully revise the way I present my arguments or put forward my descriptions	34%	28%	22%	16%

Table 4: Experimental Group perceptions of writing projects

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made me effectively integrate knowledge	24%	16%	20%	20%
2. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made the research topic focused.	18%	12%	12%	58%
3. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made research characterized by depth of discussion.	28%	4%	5%	63%
4. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made research cohesive.	12%	3%	40%	55%
5. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made me carefully revise the way I present my arguments or put forward my descriptions	20%	17%	12%	51%

The below provides information on the procedure, the corpus, and the results of the semantic analysis of the two groups' responses to the 7- open-ended interview questions. The semantic analysis was conducted manually. It revealed the experimental group's positive perceptions of the experience, whereas the interview transcripts for the control group did not show similar positive perceptions of the intercultural experience. The experimental group displayed

a range of critical engagement in the small culturally mixed groups and in the blog contexts where students could respond to authentic intercultural interactions and better understand how to send and receive messages in larger cultural groups.

The experimental group interview responses were summarized below:

In response to item 1 (How do you define intercultural communication?), the common definition of intercultural communication was the ability to communicate with people from different cultures. The ability to communicate with people of diverse cultures was the emerging theme.

In response to item 2 (What are some qualities of people who are competent in intercultural communication in Lebanon and/or in your country?), the common emergent theme entailed listing the following qualities: knowledge of culture and way of life; acceptance, understanding, freedom of speech; and being good listeners.

In response to item 3 (Can you identify some specific individuals whom you think are particularly competent in intercultural communication and say why?), the common emergent theme identified individuals competent in intercultural communication and explained why they considered them competent based on having charisma and ability to influence others; being open-minded; being confident, ability to manage workers from different societies; ability to see everyone's point of view, accepting other races and cultures; being well educated and living among different religions and cultures.

In response to item 4 (What are good aspects of communication in Lebanon?),

the common emergent theme in the given responses mentioned friendly communication style; accepting others; listening carefully; and setting high expectations.

In response to item 5 (What are aspects of bad communication in the Lebanese culture?), the common emergent themes in the responses mentioned that the Lebanese are receptive, welcoming and understanding.

In response to item 6 (what are aspects of good communication in your culture?), the common emergent themes mentioned the following aspects of good communication, namely being open to other cultures, group work activities and taking initiatives to break the ice to know others more.

In response to item 7 (What obstacles impede intercultural communication among people of different cultures?), the common emergent themes entailed the following obstacles to intercultural communication: Politics; being poor listeners; judging others and religion.

The control group interview responses were summarized below:

In response to item 1 (How do you define intercultural communication?), the common definition of intercultural communication was the ability to communicate with people from different cultures. The ability to communicate with people of different cultures was the emerging theme.

In response to item 2 (What are some qualities of people who are competent in intercultural communication in Lebanon and/or in your country?), the common emergent theme entailed listing the following qualities: globalization, Facebook and twitter

In response to item 3 (Can you identify some specific individuals whom you think are particularly competent in intercultural communication and say why?), the common emergent theme identified individuals competent in intercultural communication who had parents of different origins, having international friends and accepting other cultures.

In response to item 4 (What are good aspects of communication in Lebanon?), the common emergent theme in the given responses mentioned indirect and non-confrontational communication style to maintain personal honor; heavy reliance on context to explain the underlying meaning of their words; use of non-verbal cues and body language; avoidance of losing their tempers publicly so as not to appear weak; courteous behavior while expecting the same from others.

In response to item 5 (What are aspects of bad communication in the Lebanese culture?), the common emergent themes in the responses mentioned that the Lebanese usually miss the point and try to argue against the participants, rather than the topic. The Lebanese are poor listeners, "don't understand what the others are saying. They don't listen to understand but to reply".

In response to item 6 (what are aspects of good communication in your culture?), the common emergent themes mentioned the following aspects of good communication, namely linking the subject of discussion to national pride to fully attract audience attention; making oneself understood and inspiring people to participate in the conversation; receiving good responses as a good conversation partially hinges on it.

In response to item 7 (What obstacles impede intercultural communication among people of different cultures?), the common emergent themes entailed the following obstacles to intercultural communication: sensitive subjects; not listening; interrupting speakers or finishing their sentences; judging and stereotyping people; discussing religion.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the experimental group participants who received the blog instruction and the small culturally- mixed group work in their research writing courses improved their perceptions of intercultural communication and the writing project experience, in comparison with the control group participants who received regular research instruction.

In alignment with Zhang, et al. (2014), the study results show that blog-based peer feedback improves learners' motivation and collaboration and eventually improve students' L2 writing and L2 writing experience. The findings also endorse those of Ai, 2017, Salazar and Agüero 2016 and Chen, Shih, and Liu (2015), Bukowski and Vithanage (2016), Campbell (2003) and Knobel 2003, which assert that the current technological developments require intercultural communication skills that can take place within the framework of at least two distinct cultures. Intercultural communication can be considered a major component of the digital age. The study findings further support the findings of Fall et al. (2013) which indicate that a blog could improve intergroup communication; this in turn would develop learners' intercultural communication skills and improve their perceptions of intercultural communication. Moreover, the study findings endorse those of Chong (2010) and Liu and Dall'Alba (2012) which assert that a blog develops learners' research skills by providing them with different opportunities to acquire knowledge from each other through communicating and giving and receiving feedback before forming their own opinions. The finding of the present study demonstrate that writing teachers might use blogs to support research writing instruction. The integration of blogs into the class allows the teachers and students to work in collaboration at any time and place. In line with the study of Arslan and Kızıl (2010) who show that the integration of blog use into the research process reveals writing as a non-linear activity in which students move recursively through stages of drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, the present study showed that blog posts, along with small culturally mixed grouping, could improve the research skills of learners. In the same vein, the findings yielded by Inuma (2016) and Melo-Pfeifer

(2015), the results of the present study show that the integration of technology in education contributes highly to the acquisition of knowledge. The continuous advance of emergent technology and their social and economic effect necessitate undergoing improvements of the technology-based skills learners have (Melo-Pfeifer 2015) to meet the 21st century demands in all fields. The findings of the study also corroborate those of Coutinho (2007) and Ellison and Wu (2008) who assert that blogging could improve learners' skills and critical thinking abilities.

In addition to the above, the findings of the study align with those of Goldsmith, Stewart, and Ferguson (2006), Seethamraju and Borman (2009) and Liu and Dall'Alba (2012) who assert that group work has also been effective in promoting students' responsibility for learning and providing significant opportunities for the promotion of self-development, interactive progress and peer cooperation.

The findings of the study further endorse those of Furcsa (2009) and Steinert (2004) who demonstrate that plurilingual competence (PC) and intercultural competence (IC/ICC) are essential components for pedagogical interaction, language teaching and learning activities since people acquire knowledge about their culture and that of others through interactive communications with people from different cultures and through understanding the differences among cultures.

Conversely, the findings of this study do not align with those of Yim and Warschauer 2017, Borthwick and Gallagher-Brett 2014, Fall, Kelly, MacDonald, Primm and Holmes 2013; Chen 2010, Furcsa 2009, Xie, Ke and Sharma, 2008) who show that the participants of both control and experimental group benefited from the peer feedback they gave to each other, with and without blogging, as the experimental group benefited from the feedback they received through blogging and the control group benefited from the face to face feedback they received. Furthermore, students of both control and experimental groups improved their reflective thinking skills due to the feedback received and given. The reason for the difference in results between this study and that of Xie et al. is that the small culturally mixed grouping is the second component of the study treatment. As such, the effectiveness of the treatment is in the implementation of both, the use of the blog use and the small culturally mixed grouping- based instruction whereby the groups learned from each other's posts created by their peers in the class and by others in the other experimental participants enrolled in the two other classes. Moreover, unlike the participants of the control group who receive face-to-face peer feedback, the experimental group participants receive online feedback in addition to face to face feedback given in class. Likewise, the findings of the present study do not endorse those of Barker, Hibbins and Woods (2012) who assert that international students might suffer from discrimination in the country they chose for their education as this study shows that working within a culturally mixed group is a source of enrichment.

Accordingly, the findings of the present study show the effectiveness of the socio-constructivist approach to writing (Murray and Hourigan 2008) where learners carry out the blog writing tasks, undertake knowledge construction in collaboration with peers, and assume responsibility for all joint productions (Lamy and Hampel 2007). The study findings also assert the efficacy of the division of labor which falls under community sharing theory (Engeström, 2001). Furthermore, the findings show that learners might be motivated to do blogging and to interact and communicate with each other due to an external factor, such as the promise of having rewards in return such as high grades (Ryan and Deci 2000a). Thus, the participants' perceptions of blogging and intercultural communication with people of different cultures might be improved due to the motivation factor which may have been their main drive to act. The findings of this study may also show the validity of the Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT) which discusses the effectiveness of information technology (IT) used by individuals or institutions to ensure continuity of innovation, technology, and institutional features.

6. Conclusion

This study underscored the effectiveness of integrating blog mediated instruction and the small culturally-mixed group work on improving the research skills and the perceptions of intercultural communication of university students of different cultures. The easy access to the blog model, along with the affordability of the model, makes the blog more effective than other tools employed by the educational system. The blog model could be employed as a discussion forum that would enable teachers and learners to initiate discussions that would improve learning and the perceptions of intercultural communication. As such, it is recommended that teachers employ the blog model as part of the instruction process.

Future studies should be conducted to investigate the effectiveness of using the blog model in teaching listening and speaking through exchanging files between learners and teachers. Hence, the blog model along with the small culturally mixed groups' tool could also be used to expedite collaboration among learners. Also, it is recommended also to investigate the effectiveness of the treatment on decreasing anxiety and increasing the students' sense of belonging. Another recommendation is to investigate the effectiveness of the blog model in providing feedback and exchanging ideas among teachers in an attempt to enrich the instructors' experiences and to enable them to provide students with the 21 century skills needed to achieve objectives. One major limitation of the study is that intermittent internet connectivity, which hinders learners' collaboration as the blog cannot be accessed offline, has not been addressed by the researchers although power outage and intermittent internet connectivity are considered common problems across all regions in Lebanon.

Conflicts of interest: none.

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Appendix A: Survey 1 developed to assess perceptions of intercultural communication

Survey1: Based on the following four components: 1. Awareness of oneself and one's own cultural influences, 2. Knowledge of other cultures, 3. Recognition of emotional challenges involved, and 4. Basic skills that can be applied to most intercultural encounters, of the intercultural sensitivity training plan developed by Brislin and Yoshida (1994), the researchers developed a questionnaire that aimed at investigating the participants' perceptions of intercultural communication.

Item 1: How do you define intercultural communication?

Item 2: What are some qualities of people who are competent in intercultural communication in Lebanon and/or in your country?

Item 3: Can you identify some specific individuals whom you think are particularly competent in intercultural communication and say why?

Item 4: What are good aspects of communication in Lebanon?

Item 5: What are aspects of bad communication in the Lebanese culture?

Item 6: what are aspects of good communication in your culture?

Item7: What obstacles impede intercultural communication among people of different cultures?

Item 8: Writing employing the classroom research instruction made me able to have effective intercultural communication

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Agree
- d. Strongly Agree

Appendix B: Survey 2 developed to assess perceptions of writing projects

Survey 2: Based on the research paper rubric adapted from: Whalen, S. "Rubric from Contemporary Health Issues Research Paper" (http://academics.adelphi.edu/edu/hpe/healthstudies/whalen/HED601_r2.shtml), the researchers developed the second survey that aimed at investigating the participants' perceptions of writing research paper. The control and experimental participants' reaction towards the statements encompassed in the survey related to writing research projects experience in terms of 1) integration of knowledge, 2) focus of topic, 3) depth of discussion, 4) cohesiveness, and 5) presentation of arguments were used to assess the participants' perceptions of writing research papers.

The survey items were as follows:

1. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made me effectively integrate knowledge

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Agree
- d. Strongly Agree

2. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made the research topic focused.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Agree
- d. Strongly Agree

3. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made research characterized by depth of discussion.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Agree
- d. Strongly Agree

4. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made research cohesive.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Agree
- d. Strongly Agree

5. Writing employing the classroom research instruction on cultural topics made me carefully revise the way I present my arguments or put forward my descriptions.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Agree
- d. Strongly Agree

Appendix C: Writing Project Rubric

Adapted from: Whalen, S. "Rubric from Contemporary Health Issues Research Paper"
http://academics.adelphi.edu/edu/hpe/healthstudies/whalen/HED601_r2.shtml

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