

Saudi EFL teachers' professional development program: A study of virtual tools in enhancing teachers' inter-cultural communicative quotient

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Abstract

This study explores the potential of Online Professional Development Program (OPDP) to enhance Inter-Cultural and Communicative Quotient (IC&CQ) with specific focus on the Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms which have increasingly become multicultural given the variety of workforce in the country. The growing trend of globalization in the world is leading to an increased recognition of the significance of Inter-Cultural & Communicative Quotient (IC&CQ) in the field of education. Upon the completion of the teachers' training in the Online Teachers' Professional Development Program, data were gathered by conducting interviews with 5 EFL instructors from Saudi Arabia and 24 attendees. The results revealed that these instructors underwent significant growth in their professional and IC&CQ development. The OPDP played a crucial role in enabling them to create more communicative lessons, effectively overcome learner and cultural differences, and expand their teaching methods beyond traditional pedagogical limits. Moreover, the results also indicated that the implementation of teaching methods based on development of IC&CQ had a positive influence on the Saudi educators. This impact was evident in the enhanced understanding of differences in learners among teachers, improved communication abilities when interacting with students from diverse backgrounds, and an increased inter-cultural communicative receptiveness. The study emphasizes the necessity for Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher development policies to incorporate OTDP and develop IC&CQ amongst the academia. Additionally, it highlights the importance of addressing implementation challenges to promote IC&CQ. This strategic approach aligns with global educational trends, enabling educators to better prepare their students despite of their individual differences.

Keywords: *OPDP, Curriculum, Digital, learning, EFL, Learning, IC&CQ, Language Teachers, Pedagogy, Teacher education, Teaching.*

Introduction

The burgeoning advancements in technology, coupled with rising international exchanges and globalization, have expanded intercultural communication beyond traditional geographical confines. With this paradigm shift, the methodology in English instruction in non-native speaking settings has metamorphosed, aligning with contemporary needs and subsequently reshaping the EFL teachers' roles. Dimitrov and Haque (2016) and Kidwell (2021) emphasized that beyond mere linguistic proficiency, EFL educators are increasingly being recognized as cultural intermediaries and enablers, prepping students to seamlessly navigate multifaceted, multicultural realms (Byram, 1997). However, a considerable chasm exists. While the imperative to weave in intercultural communicative

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competence (henceforth, ICC) into teaching narratives is clear, educators grapple with its practical implementation. They frequently cite limited proficiency in infusing ICC within everyday pedagogies (Bon, 2022; Jumpakate & Hieu, 2019) and an acute deficiency in training on both the conceptual understanding of ICC and its pragmatic classroom inclusion (Safa & Tofighi, 2021). Though the significance of ICC-centric pedagogy is well-chronicled, there's a discernible paucity in empirical explorations focused on teachers' professional development (henceforth, TPD) that specifically targets augmenting teachers' ICC acumen. However, the extant corpus, though restrictive, throws light on themes including bilingual programs in Indonesia (Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2018) and academic consortiums in Colombia (Cuartas Álvarez, 2020). Emerging from this backdrop is the potential of telecollaboration. Helm and Guth (2010) advocate for its capacity to accentuate both linguistic and cultural proficiency among pre-service educators. Reinforcing this, Üzüm et al. (2020) dissected the telecollaborative partnership between trainee teachers from Turkish and USA facilitated via Edmodo, discerning marked enhancements in participants' cultural acuity and receptiveness. Our endeavor resonates with Üzüm et al. (2020) but introduces novelty by: a) furnishing participants with a robust understanding of cultural dynamics and interculturality, b) elucidating the integration of such insights into classroom choreography, and c) facilitating cross-border pedagogical collaborations. This also broadens their horizons through authentic cultural interactions with peers from diverse global quarters including Algeria, Croatia, India, Japan, Poland, and the Philippines. Yet, a focused inspection of TPD using telecollaboration from the perspective of Saudi EFL instructors remains conspicuously absent, making our qualitative inquiry both timely and pertinent.

The contemporary globalized era underscores the importance of ICC in EFL settings, as language acquisition increasingly intertwines with intercultural understanding. In Saudi Arabia, given a highly cosmopolitan populace and growing economic ties with countries worldwide, EFL education holds paramount importance, this is also acknowledged in government policy documents. However, ICC, though recognized as a critical facet of EFL education (Gu, 2016), remains relatively untapped within the Saudi educational framework. There is also, a dearth of research on this crucial aspect of modern education and this inhibits its adoption in the educational settings. In other words, there exists a conspicuous research gap in the field: while telecollaboration is hailed as a potent tool for facilitating intercultural exchanges in diverse global contexts (Dugartsyrenova & Sardegna, 2019), there is a paucity of research specifically investigating the experiences and perceptions of EFL teachers, especially those from Saudi Arabia, in leveraging telecollaboration to promote ICC. Moreover, most existing studies prioritize student experiences and outcomes, often sidelining the vital role of educators (e.g., Bon, 2022; Sobkowiak, 2021) in its success. This oversight potentially stifles the evolution and progress of ICC-focused methodologies in EFL classrooms. From a practical perspective, the challenge is twofold. Firstly, there is limited exposure and training provided to Saudi EFL teachers in the use of telecollaboration as a conduit for enhancing ICC. Secondly, the existing EFL curriculum and pedagogical practices in Saudi Arabia might not be fully equipped to accommodate the dynamic demands of intercultural education in a digitized world. This potential disconnect between the recognized importance of ICC and its actual integration in the classroom can lead to missed opportunities for holistic language learning. However, understanding and addressing these gaps can have significant implications for Saudi Arabia's EFL landscape. The current study's focal exploration of Saudi EFL teachers' experiences with telecollaboration not only aims to shed light on current practices and perceptions, but also, intends to pave the way for a more integrated, ICC-centric EFL education. Given the nation's strategic Vision 2030 initiative (which emphasizes diversifying the economy and fostering international collaborations) equipping EFL educators with the skills to cultivate ICC in students takes paramount importance. In essence, the study carries the potential to recalibrate EFL pedagogies in

Saudi Arabia, positioning them at the intersection of linguistic proficiency and intercultural communicative acumen in a digital space.

Research objectives

Given that the majority of preceding studies predominantly center on student viewpoints, with limited exploration of the perspectives of teachers, this study aims to redress this imbalance. Specifically, the objectives of this study are:

1. To explore Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding OPDP programs that are anchored in IC&CQ development.
2. To assess the efficacy of OPDP in fostering the IC&CQ of Saudi EFL teachers.

Literature Review

How language education took a digital turn

The credit for ushering technology into the education sector goes to the COVID-19 pandemic with its new norms and needs. With the closure of schools and institutions, there was an accelerated shift towards online and remote learning platforms (Hazaea et al., 2021). There was also an increased reliance on digital language learning apps such as Duolingo, Babel, and Rosetta Stone, which, as highlighted by Sun and Kong (2020), provided self-paced learning opportunities but lacked the interpersonal interaction that classroom settings offer. Even with the new age challenges like limited access to resources, disparities in technological proficiency among students, educators kept up the pace of learning, and even took to meaningful online assessment methods to suit the new paradigm (Chen et al., 2020). There were many gains that emerged from these changes: Virtual platforms allowed for broader connections, with teachers bringing in native speakers from around the world into their virtual classrooms to provide authentic linguistic experiences (Martínez & Smith, 2021). Also, the online space prompted educators to adopt innovative teaching strategies (Bin-Hady et al., 2023), leaning heavily on multimedia resources, interactive simulations, and gamified language platforms (Johnson & Rawal, 2020). With these changing learner needs, the need for teacher development also took a front foot. Language teachers now took to self-development like never before to match the learners' technological adeptness, crystallizing a digital transformation, prompting reflection, innovation, and adaptation among educators and learners alike. The most far-reaching outcome of these changes is the permanent place that educational technology has found in the echelons of education, thus, bridging the gap between learners and pedagogies like never before.

Professional Development Programs for teachers in enhancing inter-cultural and communicative competence

Professional Development Programs (PDPs) are pivotal in enhancing teachers' pedagogical capacities. Harris (2001) postulated that PDP is instrumental in fortifying teachers' abilities, creating platforms for collaborative empowerment and shared learning experiences. Notably, scholars (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Guskey, 2000; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) have emphasized that PDP hones teachers' skills, expands their knowledge base, refines attitudes, and ultimately, bolsters learning outcomes. In the context of this research, OPDP for teachers is sculpted on the innovative framework introduced by Lalana and Salamaca (2020) whose model intricately divides intercultural L2 teacher training into three interconnected sectors: cultural and intercultural proficiency, pedagogical competencies (inclusive of classroom management and curriculum design), and overarching professional abilities. Notably, the initial domain delves deep into cultural underpinnings, encapsulating facets such as linguistic-pragmatic ties, overarching cultural knowledge, and intricate communication skills. Following this, the pedagogical segment translates these theoretical nuances into tangible classroom applications. The concluding section of this

framework underscores teachers' broader roles within educational institutions, embracing responsibilities outside conventional classroom paradigms, and emphasizing lifelong learning. The genesis of IC&CQ is grounded in the evolution of communicative competence, it finds close resonance in PDPs that nurture this competence in the midst of diverse cultural exposure.

Historically, communicative competence and quotient emerged as a counter to Chomsky's delineation between linguistic competence and performance, advocating for an augmented approach (Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007). As the global linguistic landscape evolved, especially with English blossoming as the universal lingua franca, the inadequacies of mere communicative competence became evident (Alptekin, 2002). Driven by expansive global interactions, rampant migrations, and technological advancements, the global community today increasingly interacts beyond linguistic commonalities, necessitating heightened cultural sensitivities (Byram et al., 2013; Zheng, 2014). As such, ICC that boosts teachers' communicative quotient has been illuminated as the quintessential capability to engage in effective and apt intercultural discourse. Broadly, it encompasses intricate facets like cultural knowledge, attitudes, interpretative skills, and critical cultural awareness (Byram et al., 2002). This sophisticated understanding facilitates a shift towards cultural relativism (Rosado, 1999), empowering EFL educators to immerse students in diverse cultural exposures. Such immersive experiences are paramount to equipping students for global interactions (Tajeddin & Pakzadia, 2020).

Online tools in language education

Online exchanges that encompass a myriad of terminologies like tandem learning, computer-mediated communication (Thorne, 2006), and virtual exchange (O'Dowd et al., 2019), have taken the center stage in modern pedagogical practices. Essentially, it is the melding of geographically dispersed learners to facilitate sustained collaborative work and cross-cultural exchanges (Belz, 2002; O'Dowd et al., 2019). Within the ambit of this study, virtual collaboration is spotlighted as a tool to bridge EFL educators with local and international interlocutors, particularly from outer and expanding circle countries, for a rich tapestry of intercultural experiences that boost teachers' communicative quotient as well as cultural sensitivity. The digital age has seen a plethora of internet-based platforms championing such collaboration, ranging from email interactions (Al-Khatib, 2021) to more real time mediums like global chat websites, WhatsApp (Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Pasand et al., 2021), blogging spaces (Fuchs, 2016; García-Sánchez & Rojas-Lizana, 2012), and dynamic video conferencing tools like Skype (Hsu & Beasley, 2019) and Zoom (Freiermuth & Huang, 2021). Thorne (2006) has lauded virtual collaboration as an invaluable tool in fostering intercultural cognizance within language instruction. A wealth of research underscores the positive dividends of internet-based collaboration across varied educational landscapes. For instance, Magos et al. (2013) evidenced heightened awareness of linguistic and cultural diversities among Greek kindergarten learners, while Okumura (2020) highlighted an amplified affinity for English and cultural appreciation among Japanese primary learners. More recently, Eren (2023) orchestrated an innovative study using both asynchronous (Edmodo) and synchronous (Zoom) modalities for pre-service educators across Europe. Findings resonated with the transformative potential of the internet, revealing its prowess in dispelling biases and cultivating critical intercultural understanding. However, this path is not without challenges. While its advantages are manifold, impediments like technological glitches (Avgousti, 2018), time zone disparities (Yang, 2020), and variances in linguistic capabilities (Ciftci & Savas, 2018) have been cited as the obstacles in scholarly discourses.

Saudi EFL teachers' IC&CQ and the internet tools

A study on enhancing IC&CQ through virtual collaboration tools, focusing on the perspective of Saudi EFL teachers, holds significant implications for the field of EFL instruction, technology integration in education, and intercultural competence development. First, from an EFL

instructional perspective, the demand for English language skills has been rising steadily, especially in countries where English is not the first language (Nguyen & Intaraprasert, 2015). As globalization intensifies, the ability to communicate effectively in English is seen not only as a linguistic skill, but also, as a means to understand and interact with diverse cultures. This perspective makes ICC an integral component of EFL instruction (Martin & Nakayama, 2016). The current study, focusing on Saudi EFL educators, provides a rich and contextual insight into how ICC can be cultivated effectively in settings where cultural conservatism may influence language pedagogy. Secondly, in terms of technology integration, telecollaboration represents one of the prominent pedagogical advancements in the 21st century. Virtual collaboration, being an online exchange platform between individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, offers an authentic environment for learners and educators to experience intercultural interactions (O'Dowd, 2017). By analyzing the experiences and perceptions of Saudi EFL teachers, the study sheds light on the potential challenges and rewards of integrating internet-based practices in a region that might face unique technological and cultural barriers. Furthermore, the study's significance is also underscored by its potential to bridge the gap between traditional pedagogies and contemporary needs. As highlighted by Johnson and Syed (2018), traditional teaching methodologies in many EFL settings, including Saudi Arabia, have primarily been text-centric with limited emphasis on real-world communicative contexts. Virtual collaboration offers a paradigm shift, allowing students and teachers to move beyond textbook interactions and engage in meaningful dialogues with global peers. Lastly, the focus on Saudi EFL teachers offers a unique contribution to the literature. While numerous studies have delved into virtual collaboration and ICC development, there is a scarcity of research focusing specifically on Saudi Arabia—a country with its own distinct linguistic, cultural, and educational backdrop (Albelihi, 2022; Alqurashi, 2022; Kitishat et al., 2020). Thus, by spotlighting Saudi EFL teachers' experiences, the study fills a critical research gap, offering guidelines, reflections, and considerations for similar contexts worldwide. In essence, the study's significance is multi-dimensional. It resonates with global educators aiming to integrate ICC in their pedagogy and eager to develop the cultural and communicative quotient of teachers in EFL contexts, with technology enthusiasts exploring the transformative potential of internet-based tools, and with policymakers and curriculum developers understanding the nuanced needs of contemporary EFL education.

Methods

Research design

This study takes a qualitative interpretative approach to ensure that it captured the nuanced, multifaceted experiences and perspectives of Saudi EFL teachers. Unlike quantitative research, which often revolves around numerical data and generalized findings, qualitative research emphasizes depth, context, and individual experiences. The interpretative aspect further magnified this focus, allowing the researcher to delve deeper into how participants constructed meaning from their experiences, ensuring a holistic understanding of their perceptions and attitudes. The study focused on Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions of this modality. This research design, with its qualitative interpretative lens and context-specific focus, promised a comprehensive, in-depth exploration of Saudi EFL teachers' experiences, methodological preferences, and perceptions. By intertwining the threads of culture, collaboration, communicative competence, and technology, the study aimed to present a tapestry of insights that could guide future pedagogical practices and interventions in the realm of EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia.

Participants

Five Saudi EFL instructors were engaged in an online professional development program (OPDP) in this study and their reflections on the experience were analyzed. Unanimously, they recognized a marked enhancement in their inter-cultural and communicative quotient (IC&CQ) following the OPDP. Their

experiences were transformative, helping them integrate the new understanding into their pedagogical practices. The requisite exposure was provided to the participants through a targeted OPDP series. The overarching theme, “Integrating Culture and Interculturality in EFL Instruction,” underscored the symbiotic relationship between language instruction and cultural assimilation, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia's unique linguistic and cultural landscape. The series was strategically promoted to ensure maximum reach and participation. A multifaceted approach to invitation dissemination was adopted. While digital platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, given their vast user base and immediacy of message relay, played a pivotal role in spreading the word, a more hands-on approach was also deemed necessary. The research team, acknowledging the importance of personal touch in driving participation, made concerted efforts to visit various schools. These visits not only allowed for the direct promotion of the program but also facilitated interactions with potential participants, offering clarity and addressing any reservations or queries they might have had.

Procedures

Although the workshop initially witnessed a promising turnout of 24 attendees, consistent active engagement was observed among only five male teachers. Notably, the pre-existing personal and professional ties with the researcher played an instrumental role in this context. Such connections not only facilitated more open and candid discussions but also expedited the trust-building process, a factor crucial in any research relying on personal and professional reflections. Ensuring the ethical integrity of the study was paramount. Every participant, before delving into the series, was briefed extensively about the study's goals, the nature of their involvement, the methodologies employed, and any potential risks or discomforts they might encounter. Drawing from the guidelines suggested by Patton (2015), comprehensive informed consent forms were provided to the respondents. These forms elucidated the participants' rights, ensuring they were well-aware of their ability to withdraw at any point without repercussions. Moreover, the assurance of confidentiality was emphasized, assuring participants that their identities, personal anecdotes, and professional reflections would be safeguarded and anonymized in any subsequent publications or presentations.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the wake of the resumption of normal life with the pandemic a thing of the past, and with the education sector armed with the use of technology in all spheres, the researcher recognized the advantages and flexibility of online platforms and opted for OPDPs as the primary method for engaging with the Saudi EFL teachers. These not only prioritized the availability and convenience of the participants, but also, afforded a seamless continuation of the study irrespective of any changes in the participants' teaching commitments. Over a period of seven weeks, a triangulated approach was adopted to ensure a comprehensive collection of data. Observations offered real-time insights into participant behaviors, interactions, and engagement levels. These were structured using Byram's (1997, 2002) ICC framework, a tool well-regarded for its applicability in studying ICC. Alongside, post-session reflections acted as a mirror to the participants' thoughts, enabling the research to tap into their immediate perceptions, concerns, and feelings about the content presented and its relevance to their professional contexts. In-depth, video-recorded interviews further enriched the data, providing deeper layers of understanding regarding their experiences and challenges. It is noteworthy that while some discussions during these sessions were conducted in a blend of Arabic and English, consistent efforts were made to translate them comprehensively into English, ensuring linguistic uniformity and clarity during the analysis phase. Employing a thematic analysis technique as elucidated by Braun and Clarke (2016, 2019), the amassed data underwent a rigorous examination. Emphasis was laid on recognizing recurrent patterns, themes, and categories, ensuring a structured and holistic interpretation of the

participants' experiences. This approach, rooted in methodological robustness, facilitated a nuanced dissection of the complex interplay between virtual collaboration, teacher perceptions, and the enhancement of IC&CQ. To fortify the study's credibility and trustworthiness, member-checking procedures were meticulously integrated into the research process. Participants were given the opportunity to review the initial interpretations and findings, allowing them to confirm, refute, or provide additional insights to them. As elucidated by Smith and McGannon (2018), this iterative process bolsters the validity of the study, ensuring that the conclusions drawn genuinely reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Results and Discussion

Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions on the online professional development program

From Table 1, it becomes apparent that the Saudi EFL teachers exhibited an overall positive perception of OPDP when grounded in virtual collaboration. Their experiences, however, showcased the challenges and rewards associated with this approach. They shared some positive perspectives on their professional development owing to the internet mode. For instance, they shared that virtual collaboration makes lessons attractive, bridges cultural divide and allows them to step outside of the conventional boundaries. Table 1 displays the opinion that virtual collaboration enriches teacher's pedagogical repertoire, expands their understanding of cultural differences in education and, offers fresh insights into EFL teaching from a global perspective. Specifically, Teacher A stated, "Initially, I struggled with the technical aspects, but it became intuitive over time. I managed to connect with teachers from various cultures, which enriched my teaching methods and enhanced my inter-cultural understanding and quotient". Additionally, Teacher B argued, "It was overwhelming at first, but with peer support, I could navigate better. The chance to collaborate internationally has expanded my understanding of cultural differences in education and has definitely enriched me as a teacher.". Teacher C reports, "OPPD enhances the communicative aspect in my lesson delivery". Teacher D mentions, "OPDP enables teachers to go beyond traditional limitations". Finally, Teacher E summed up, "There was a learning curve, especially with scheduling across time zones. However, the experience was rewarding, offering fresh insights into EFL teaching from a global perspective".

Table 1. Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding the OPDP program anchored in virtual collaboration

Participant	Perception of OPDP via virtual collaboration	Impact of OTDP on teachers' IC&CQ
Teacher A	It makes lessons more interactive	It improves teachers' understanding of othercultures.
Teacher B	It bridges the cultural divide	It empowers teachers to communicate effectivelywith students from other cultures.
Teacher C	OPDP enhances the interactivity of lessons.	It provides teachers with other culture boundaries
Teacher D	OPDP enables teachers to go beyond traditional limitations	It develops understanding how other people think and feel like.
Teacher E	It allows teachers to step outside conventional boundaries	It makes teachers culturally and communicatively receptive.

These findings implied that EFL educators globally could benefit from collaborative OPDSs using virtual platforms, given their potential to offer fresh perspectives and foster global collaborations. Likewise, teacher training programs should integrate modules that focus on overcoming the technical challenges of virtual collaboration to facilitate smoother transitions for educators. Finally, institutions must consider peer support systems for teachers participating in such programs to alleviate the feelings of being overwhelmed and aid in navigation. Recent studies emphasized the importance and potential of virtual tools in education. Smith and Jones (2016) noted that telecollaborative projects lead to enhanced cultural awareness among participants. Additionally, White (2020) discussed the challenges, such as the technical barriers and time zone issues mentioned by the teachers in this study, suggesting that educators often face a steep learning curve but also reap considerable rewards. Finally, Garcia (2021) emphasized the transformative nature

of such initiatives in pedagogical practices, aligning with the sentiments expressed by all five teacher participants.

The efficacy of virtual collaboration based in fostering IC&CQ of Saudi EFL teachers

Table 1 indicates that the interviewees had positive perceptions on undergoing virtual collaboration-based OPDP to develop their IC&CQ. The emergent themes are: it improves teachers' understanding of other cultures, it empowers teachers to communicate effectively with students from other cultures, and it makes teachers culturally receptive. Teacher A opined, "learning through virtual collaboration during the OPDP exposed me to diverse teaching contexts and cultures. I have become more sensitive and adaptive to cultural nuances in my teaching, a transformation I owe to this experience.". Similarly, Teacher B added that the program made teachers culturally receptive. Adopting the virtual OPDP, according to Teacher A was, "engaging as it not only deepened my understanding of various teaching practices but also enriched my IC&CQ. The cross-cultural exchanges were particularly insightful." Finally, Teacher C added, "this OPDP journey was an eye-opener. By collaborating with peers from various backgrounds, I developed a genuine appreciation for cultural differences and their implications in communicative EFL pedagogies".

They reported becoming more understanding, receptive, and adaptive to cultural nuances, thereby bolstering their ability to communicate effectively in intercultural contexts. In like manner, as to the reflections on OPDP and IC&CQ Development, the educators' reflections highlight the profound impact of global interactions and exchanges. By exposing them to diverse cultural and teaching contexts, the virtual collaboration-based OPDP broadened their horizons, leading to a richer understanding of the complexities of intercultural teaching and learning.

These findings established that virtual collaboration-based OPDPs can be effective for fostering IC&CQ among educators. Institutions and education policymakers may consider incorporating such programs more extensively. Further, beyond the technical and pedagogical aspects, it can serve as a potent tool for promoting cross-cultural understanding, which is pivotal in today's globalized education landscape. Finally, as educators become more interculturally competent, students too can benefit from a more inclusive and culturally rich learning environment. The efficacy of online professional development programs in augmenting the IC&CQ of educators, as highlighted by the present study, is consistent with prior research. The significance of ICC in modern education cannot be stressed enough, especially in the EFL context. ICC ensures that teachers are equipped to handle the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students, thereby enriching the learning experience (Byram, 2017). Being interculturally competent implies having an understanding, awareness, and ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with those from different cultural backgrounds (Deardorff, 2015). In like manner, online collaboration, or online intercultural exchange, offers educators an opportunity for authentic, collaborative, and intercultural learning experiences. Such platforms provide an interactive space for educators across the globe to engage, collaborate, and share pedagogical strategies, enhancing their ICC in the process (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016).

Studies have found that professional development programs for teachers, when integrated with virtual collaboration, can be instrumental in broadening the perspectives of educators, particularly in understanding cultural nuances and pedagogies across borders (Smith & Gorsuch, 2018). The real-time, virtual collaboration exposes educators to real-world challenges and allows for immediate feedback and reflection. Beyond mere personal and professional development, it fosters an understanding of the implications of these cultural nuances in classroom settings. The more teachers are exposed to diverse cultural contexts, the better equipped they are in delivering lessons tailored for a diverse student populace (Liaw & English, 2020). Despite its advantages, OPDP does come with challenges, including technical glitches, scheduling conflicts across time zones, and the potential for

cultural misunderstandings. However, as highlighted by many studies, the benefits outweigh the challenges, making it a worthwhile endeavor for modern educators (Wang & Fetters, 2019) to try out the strategy in different settings.

The findings of this study align closely with the current landscape of EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia. Over the years, the Saudi Arabian educational landscape has been undergoing transformations to cater to the globalizing world. The integration of OPDPs within the EFL sector in Saudi Arabia seems timely and pertinent. Saudi Arabia's EFL curriculum has been designed not just to impart language skills, but also to familiarize students with cultural contexts. As the world is becoming increasingly interconnected, the importance of IC&CQ in the Saudi Arabian EFL classroom is growing. With the Vision 2030 initiative, there is an emphasis on modernizing the education system, and the findings from this study suggest that telecollaboration can be a catalyst in this transformation. By equipping educators with enhanced IC&CQ through OPDPs, it becomes more feasible to achieve the overarching objective of producing students who are not just linguistically proficient but also culturally sensitive and globally aware. Furthermore, the challenges in language teaching in Saudi Arabia are multifaceted. On the one hand, there are pedagogical challenges like the need to make lessons engaging and relevant. On the other, there are socio-cultural challenges where educators must strike a balance between global English proficiency and cultural preservation. The educators' positive perception of OPDPs, as highlighted in this study, resonates with the need for innovative solutions to these challenges. By enabling EFL educators in Saudi Arabia to collaborate with their international counterparts, not only do they receive a broader perspective on teaching methodologies, but they also learn to integrate global cultural nuances without compromising local values. However, the technical challenges encountered by the educators, such as technological barriers and time-zone differences, echo broader concerns in Saudi's EFL teaching landscape. As the country engages in happily bringing technology to the classrooms, it is essential to ensure that both educators and students are equipped with the requisite skills to navigate this digital shift. As Saudi Arabia continues its journey towards educational modernization, integrating internet-based approaches in EFL, OPDPs could be a step in the right direction. Not only does this align with the country's push for globalization and modernization, but it also addresses the unique challenges faced by EFL educators in the region.

Conclusion

This study provides a unique examination of how the integration of online platforms in teachers' professional development programs (OPDPs) enhances teachers' Inter-Cultural and Communicative Quotient (IC&CQ) in the Saudi EFL context. With globalization on the rise and intercultural interactions becoming increasingly common, the demand for enhancing teachers' IC&CQ in the context of EFL education in Saudi Arabia has grown significantly. However, this area of study remains relatively unexplored, especially when it comes to understanding teachers' experiences and perceptions. The study's findings shed light on a multifaceted story. Saudi EFL teachers recognize the potential of online collaboration as a rich, transformative tool. They see it as a means to modernize traditional teaching approaches, bridge cultural gaps, and infuse EFL instruction with globally relevant perspectives. However, their journey has not been without its challenges. While they embraced the novelty and richness of cross-cultural interactions, they also grappled with technological, logistical, and informational obstacles. Despite these difficulties, the benefits were clear: improved IC&CQ, broader teaching perspectives, and a newfound appreciation for the diversity of global education.

Furthermore, this research aligns with a broader global sentiment. In a world where technology blurs boundaries, educators need not only linguistic skills but also the ability

to navigate, understand, and value the various cultures they encounter. Telecollaboration emerges as a crucial tool in this context, offering not just pedagogical improvements but a fundamental shift in understanding the interconnected relationship between language and culture.

In essence, while challenges persist, the potential of telecollaborative TPDPs to reshape EFL education and strengthen IC&CQ is undeniable. This study reinforces the idea that in today's interconnected world, for a truly comprehensive EFL education, the fusion of language instruction with intercultural competence, facilitated by innovative platforms like telecollaboration, is not just advantageous—it is imperative.

Recommendations and future Research Direction

Based on the insights gleaned from this research, we propose several suggestions for both policymakers and educators in the Saudi EFL context:

(1) Educational institutions should prioritize the integration of virtual Professional Development Programs (OPDP) for teachers. This can empower teachers to harness the transformative potential of the internet, thereby modernizing traditional teaching methods and bridging cultural gaps; (2) Stakeholders, particularly educational authorities, should allocate resources towards improving infrastructure and providing teacher training to address the technological, logistical, and informational challenges that educators often encounter when adopting telecollaboration; (4) the EFL curriculum should be revised to incorporate more globally relevant content and experiences. This not only enhances language skills but also nurtures Inter-Cultural and Communicative Quotient (IC&CQ), which is essential in today's interconnected world; (5) in addition to language proficiency, teacher training programs should emphasize the significance of intercultural competence. Such programs would empower educators to better understand and navigate the diverse cultures they encounter in their professional journey.

Looking ahead to future research, several promising avenues could be explored: Comparative studies could be conducted to assess how the experiences of Saudi EFL educators compare with those of their counterparts in other countries. This would provide a broader perspective on the global challenges and advantages of telecollaboration. Long-term investigations could be undertaken to examine the lasting impact of Telecollaboration-based TPDPs on educators' teaching methods and students' academic achievements.

Beyond net-based collaboration, research could explore other emerging platforms and technologies that have the potential to enhance EFL instruction, ICC, and IC&CQ. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the findings of this study can serve as a guide. Implementing these recommendations and exploring the suggested research directions will ensure that EFL educators are well-prepared to deliver a comprehensive education that combines language instruction with intercultural competence.

Implications of the study for the internationalization initiatives of universities

The findings of this study have significant implications for the internationalization efforts of both Saudi Arabian and global universities. As universities strive to become more globally connected and promote multicultural understanding, it is crucial to integrate innovative platforms like telecollaboration into teacher development programs. One key takeaway is that the need for ICC and IC&CQ extends beyond EFL education in Saudi Arabia; it is relevant to universities worldwide. In a rapidly globalizing world with increasingly diverse student populations, curricula must evolve to transcend national boundaries and equip graduates with intercultural skills. This

study highlights the role of telecollaboration in achieving this goal, emphasizing its potential to bridge cultural gaps and provide globally relevant insights.

Furthermore, as universities engage in internationalization initiatives, student and faculty exchange programs are often a focal point. However, logistical, financial, and political challenges can impede these exchanges. Telecollaboration emerges as a valuable alternative, enabling real-time, enriching cross-cultural interactions without the need for physical mobility. The experiences of Saudi EFL teachers, as illustrated in this study, offer universities valuable insights into the benefits and challenges of virtual exchanges, serving as a guide for effective integration.

Additionally, universities aiming for comprehensive internationalization must reconsider traditional teaching methods. The finding that telecollaboration can transform traditional pedagogies is significant. Instead of confining curricula to local content, universities can use telecollaborative platforms to co-create modules with partner institutions from diverse cultural backgrounds, ensuring a globally relevant curriculum. However, it is essential to acknowledge that implementing telecollaboration comes with its own set of challenges, including technological, logistical, and informational barriers. Therefore, universities must invest in robust infrastructure, provide training for educators, and establish clear protocols to overcome these hurdles. The fact that Saudi EFL teachers in this study found tangible benefits in enhanced ICC and broader pedagogical perspectives despite the challenges underscores the importance of such investments.

Furthermore, universities can leverage virtual collaboration not only for teaching but also for research collaborations, global seminars, workshops, and conferences. The study emphasizes the need for educators to possess both linguistic expertise and the ability to navigate diverse cultures, reinforcing the idea that faculty development programs should be integrated into the online collaborative framework.

As the boundaries between countries blur, and the world becomes an interconnected web of cultures, languages, and ideas, universities are at the forefront of this change. The study on Saudi EFL educators and their experiences with virtual collaboration offers higher education institutions a valuable perspective on the possibilities and challenges of such initiatives. Embracing virtual collaboration and the resulting enhancement of ICC and IC&CQ is not merely an option but a necessity for universities seeking to position themselves as truly global institutions. The fusion of language instruction with intercultural competence, facilitated by platforms offered by online collaboration, is not just a beneficial addition but a critical imperative for the comprehensive internationalization of higher education in the 21st century.

Acknowledgements

The researcher would like to thank the Deanship of Scientific Research, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, for funding the publication of this project.

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