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Othering in EFL Hybrid Learning in the Algerian Higher Education Context

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine deeply Algerian students' othering in online learning. The study is carried out using phenomenological design. The data are collected using a semi-structured interview from 10 students who have been enrolled in hybrid learning at Algerian universities in the academic year 2020-2021 selected through convenience sampling, a purposeful sampling method. Students' opinions were taken regarding how they described othering, their experience in online classes, disconnectedness from peers and instructors, and the challenges faced while going back to mandatory classes at the end of the semesters. The results will contribute in understanding how "otherness" is newly perceived in 21st century, and thus, setting adjustments of the notion in online discourse.

Keywords: face-to-face FL classes, otherness, disconnectedness, hybrid learning.

Introduction

Face-to-face foreign language classes centralise "othering" practices, which help students grow in critical understanding, cultural diversity, and positive appreciation towards the richness of plurality and multiplicity. However, the pandemic and post COVID-19 period obliged teaching worldwide to shift towards online and hybrid learning. The latter has been linked to students' high dropout rates, which have been accredited to feelings of isolation and disconnection among students due to their physical separation (Angelino, Williams & Natvig, 2007 [1]; Kanuka & Rovai, 2002a [2]). The Algerian higher education context was no exception. Before the pandemic, this system was only used as an addition to support traditional face-to-face education because of the unpre-

paredness of its resources or facilities (Hughes, 2007). [3] Subsequently, the shift from face-to-face FL classes to distant learning made the students experience a new genre of “othering” and disjunction from all the learning agents around them, including their peers. As a matter of fact, a brief review of the literature revealed the high dropout rates of learners’ disconnectedness and isolation from the class and instructor in the online experience (Phirangee, Demmans, & Hewitt, 2016). [4]

In order to straighten out these feelings, many educators have chosen to focus on the ‘social nature of learning’ (Hew, 2015) [5] such as empowering learners’ sense of community within their courses. Despite the efforts, students still experience negative feelings, which lead them to disconnect not only from the course content, but also from their peers, and their instructors (Angelino et al., 2007 [6]; Phirangee, 2016). [7] This study explores the underlying reasons students may develop feelings of isolation and disconnection within an online course.

Hybrid learning

The 21st century necessitates schools and educational institutions to incorporate Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) and internet in teaching for a more globalized educational system. This was backed up by the COVID-19 pandemic which led to the stopping of many universities and schools for a while. In order to face it, many universities opted for blended learning, and Algeria was no exception.

Hybrid or blended learning “represents a compromise, combining a face-to-face component with computer-based distance learning where teacher and learner interact dynamically” (Jordan et.al. 2008). [8] It is defined as “learning that combines online activity with more traditional periods of face-to-face contact and classroom interaction” (O’Dowd, 2007). [9]

According to Albiladi & Alshareef (2019) [10], blended learning is an upgraded educational approach that integrates traditional teaching methodologies with distance and online learning. In fact, an applicable approach to education while it is a combination of traditional approaches of face-to-face education with technological-integrated approaches.

Waddoups and Howell's explain that “hybridization occurs when on-campus educators adopt distance education technologies and practices, and when distance education organizations adopt/adapt campus-based educational practices” (2002, as cited in Bärenfänger, 2005 [11]). According to Zhang & Zhu (2018) [12], it is difficult to develop an appropriate learning context for all learners, but the blended learning approach assists in a flexible, interactive, encouraging, and inspiring teaching and learning environment.

Othering in Online Classes

Despite the fact that online education is a great asset for the 21st century era, it still struggles with a few discrepancies, namely; the lack of motivation among students, digital literacy, and the lack of in-person interaction. The latter is one of the biggest challenges facing online learning which creates a sort of “identity incongruence” among the agents of the teaching/learning situation. According to Phirangee & Malec (2017) [13], students in online classes feel disconnected and isolated from their course due to the physical separation from each other and the instructor. This isolation leads to students’ high drop outs’ rates (Rovai, 2002a) [14]; limited interaction among students (Carr, 2000) [15]; conflict between societal beliefs and students’ personal and cultural beliefs; and misunderstandings among students when communicating (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). [16], Subsequently, the students in similar contexts no longer feel the membership in one unified community in which their identity does not fit with the group (Hughes, 2007). [17]

Therefore, teachers are invigorated to focalize “the social nature of learning” within their online classes which stresses the need for students to interact and discuss the content with each other (Hew, 2015). [18] Ultimately, this will provide students with a certainly positive online experience.

Othering

Based on the psychoanalytical concepts of Jacques Lacan, the term Othering was re-coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the context of postcolonial theory, and since then it has been widely applied, in particular within anthropology. Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha are both prominent writers who have dealt with discursive and political practices that can be described as Othering. “Othering” or “Otherness” is a conception that includes the self and the other, whereby an individual differentiates, or objectifies the other through an individual’s presence as the self (Moncada Linares, 2016). [19] In the literature, Othering is defined as a process in which, through discursive practices, different subjects are formed, hegemonic subjects – that is, subjects in powerful social positions as well as those subjugated to these powerful conditions. In fact, Edward Said (1978) [20] argued that othering occurs when those who differ from the dominant ideas are devalued and set apart as the other. To reach such an analytic description, however, some measure of abstraction is required, because Othering denotes simultaneously both the features of discourse structures and processes, and the formation of subjectivity engendered by such discourse. In specialized discussions, but increasingly within everyday communication as well, the term Othering is used to refer to phenomena of stereotyping and racialization. This incorporation of the term into everyday language runs the risk of diminishing the analytic precision of the concept.

Methodology

For a more efficient and accurate understanding of the concept of othering in online courses, a qualitative case study was adopted. The literature in research methodology suggests that in order to investigate the reason and the way in contemporary phenomena where little to no control of behavioral events is required, one commonly utilizes a case study (Yin, 2014). [21] Case studies help in exhibiting an intensive analysis of many specific details which are oftentimes neglected with other methods.

In order to examine othering in EFL hybrid learning in the Algerian Higher Education Context, answers to the following questions were sought:

- 1) Do students experience the same otherness in blended learning?
- 2) What are the reasons behind being othered in online courses?
- 3) Does the otherness experienced by the students lead to courses' drop out?

Research tools

The data for the study were collected using qualitative semi-structured interviews from ten graduate students, who have been enrolled in hybrid learning at Algerian universities in the academic year 2020-2021 and explored students' online behaviors and experiences. The participants were recruited through a face-to-face invitation and selected through convenience sampling - a purposeful sampling method, since the researchers are both part-time lecturers at the University of Mohamed Seddik Benyahia, and University of Mouloud Maameri in Algeria. Convenience sampling or availability sampling, is one of the purposeful sampling methods, was adopted due to the speed and practicality it gives to the researcher when selecting a situation that is close and easy to access (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). [22] The participants were 7 females and 3 males ranging in age from 23 to 25 years old, who were all non-native speakers of English. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences from at least one recent online course during a semi-structured interview that lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. The interview uses a variety of questions starting with general to more deep questions about the course situation. Examples of the guiding questions used in the interview are: 1) Tell me about a memorable experience in a recent online course? 2) Think about your online tutors. Are there any that stand out? 3) Tell us about a time when one made a comment about you.

All the interviews were conducted in English at the completion of the online course, where the participants met face-to-face with one of the researchers. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed.

Findings

The interviews were transcribed and the results were coded using thematic analysis. The findings provided three different othering genres according to the total responses obtained from the interviewees, which are as follows: Academic other, Professional other, Ethnic other.

Academic other: It has to do with the academic course and content of the subject. It is the type of othering experienced when the participants faced difficulty in engaging in discussions and developing deep understanding of the content.

Professional other: It has to do with the teachers. It is the othering related to the expectations about the instructors and the course.

Ethnic other: It has to do with students' ethnicity. Othering felt when the interviewees expressed their struggle in sharing their personal experiences relating to ethnicity in the classes.

Data analysis

Three participants experienced professional othering in relation to the course and their instructors. These participants experienced difficulty getting along with their instructors due to the fact of being engaged in an outside job where their teacher failed to accommodate a suitable timing for the courses. They were unable to develop a positive feeling about the course and their tutor which made them experience disconnection.

Examples of the interviewee's responses. Interviewee number 5 who is an accountant and a student at the same time said:

“She [the teacher] wasn't available when the feedback day came in. It was a weekend day, I understand....it was always Saturday where people usually take rest, like, from working but that was different and she knew I was in much need for that feedback... you know, I couldn't attend regularly because of my job. I tried to talk to her and ask her, I mean, if we can accommodate the timing again but she didn't respond even [sighed] I knew she didn't like me”.

Another interviewee, number 10, who has a part-time teaching position as an English Teacher said:

“I always had this understanding of teachers' mentality and why acting like this, I mean, I am a teacher myself, and I have always appreciated this opportunity I have to learn more and more but I get busy in work sometimes and as a result I just get detached from the course and everybody... errrr but again I found a way out and I read more and I get the lectures from anywhere I could and try to go back on the track... like I mean it is an online course and particularly because of that to me it's such a shame.”

Six participants identified academic othering during the online classes. The othering they experienced was basically in relation to different points of views

shared by their peers which led to a struggle in understanding the content and thus a negative feeling towards the class and the other agents. The first interviewee explained the disconnectedness he felt saying:

“[laughs] I actually have something to say concerning the students and the work... I mean I noticed that my classmates just compete over homework and who’s doing better, like, just for that I mean we study but they keep repeating the same thing or like just adding another line from the student before them but praising the work as if...I don’t like anyone, I don’t want to engage or talk to individuals who they don’t aspire to go deeper and learn the content... they like prioritize quantity over quality, that’s it! All they care about is the marks and grades and teachers’ compliments, whatever!”

Only one participant developed ethnic othering when sharing personal experiences about ethnicity. The participant number 3 felt as a misfit when sharing a different perspective. The interviewee told us that he is not from the region and that she has been experiencing the ethnic othering all along her four years at college. She said:

“I always feel pressure to share my ideas and engage among my fellow students and even teacher even in [online] discussion ... I don’t want them to start questions. It has always been the case. So, in my classes a lot of [eole] from here, and they don’t get it. So, I really worry they cannot understand me. Whenever I [used to] want to say something [in class] I really look confusing. It’s true. It’s been the case in every linguistics’ class when we all give examples of languages and dialects. And I find it really hard to join their small circle. I don’t think they meant to exclude me but sometimes they are laughing and joking and I don’t know why they are laughing. Maybe because we only meet few times face to face, I don’t know.”

Discussion

This study was carried out through a semi-structured interview conducted with 10 undergraduates studying at Algerian universities to investigate otherness in online classes. The results showed that learners experience a variety of othering types by instructors, peers, content, points of view, perspectives.... etc. through academic expectations, job responsibilities, and ethnic identities. These othering types were grouped into academic, professional, and ethnic othering respectively. Our participants expressed feelings of isolation all along the course they talked about in relation to at least one specific type of othering mentioned earlier. Hughes (2007) [23] believes that when a student’s dominant identity does not fit with the group, then the individual is likely to experience incongruence. This is the case of interviewee number 3 who felt excluded from the other members of the course because of ethnic differences.

According to Hughes (2007), students can only feel included if there is a “congruence between learners’ social identities and the identities are implicitly supported through the interactions in a particular community”. (p. 709) [24] Marginalization of members lead to a breakdown of a community within the course taken. As a matter of fact, a sense of community can only be developed through marking a social presence and valuing all the members through the development of camaraderie and social reinforcement. (Conrad, 2005) [25] which, in turn, alleviates disconnectedness. The first interviewee in our study commented her peers’ attitudes towards the course as “prioritizing quantity over quality” which does not match her own personal beliefs, eventually this lead to isolation from her peers’ group community.

Even though the findings did not record any drop out from all the ten students during the academic year 2020/2021 as expected (Rovai, 2002a [26], 2002b) [27], the participants developed negative feelings and disjunction from all the learning agents around them (tutors, peers, content and course).

Conclusion

The main goal of this research has been to examine otherness in hybrid classes in Algerian universities through a semi-structured interview. Students’ opinions were taken regarding how they described othering, their experience in online classes, disconnectedness from peers and instructors, and the challenges faced while going back to mandatory classes at the end of the semesters. Findings revealed that participants experienced three different types of otherness namely; professional othering, academic othering, and ethnic othering. Most of the students mentioned at least one experience where feeling othered which lead to disconnectedness from the content, the tutor, or even their peers. They illustrated this by means of isolation and decrease in class engagement. Nonetheless, none of them skipped classes or dropped out of the course. Therefore, it has been concluded from the study that Algerian students experience different types of otherness throughout online courses via at least one course agent. It may be helpful to provide EFL educators at all levels with in-service training on integrating global citizenship education into ELT so that they can organize the teaching-learning environment according to global citizenship education. However, it should be reminded that this study was carried out through interviews with 10 students studying at two universities in Algeria as a whole. Similar studies with larger samples based on mixed methods can provide significant contributions in terms of clarifying the subject in larger groups. In addition, other qualitative studies carried out at different levels can be useful in explaining the issue in depth and will definitely make a great contribution to the field.

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