

## **TEACHING ACROSS FRONTIERS: FROM CULTURAL CLASHES TO BROADENING MINDSETS**

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### **Abstract**

EFL Teaching is a complex process since it goes beyond the linguistic level and is broadly related to culture. The cultural aspect of EFL teaching is obviously reflected in the EFL content but also in the teacher-student, and student-student communication. When teachers and learners belong to different cultural communities it obviously benefits both sides in terms of language and culture. Yet, there can be some clashes that result from different cultural backgrounds and poor communication. The purpose of this paper is to review the impact of culture on EFL teaching and learning according to a survey-based study and to discuss some recommendations for minimizing cultural bumps in EFL teaching and learning.

Keywords: EFL, cultural clashes, effects, impact

### **INTRODUCTION**

The importance of cross-border teaching goes beyond any doubt despite its challenges. It brings much use to beneficiaries and fosters collaboration and improvement through mutual experience exchange. Fruitful collaboration is possible when either side is open and is ready to consider and accept the “cultural, socio-economic, and epistemological differences” [1] of the partner country and rethink their own. Therefore, cross-border teaching becomes productive when either side is prepared to face challenges, learn from them, and reach a compromise. This paper aims to bring forward the advantages and difficulties of cross-border teaching which is performed by the US volunteers in the Republic of Moldova from two perspectives: the volunteers and the students, to perform comparative and contrastive analyses of expectations vs achievements, teacher and students’ challenges in order to work out some recommendations for either group. However, researching all its aspects is not the goal of this paper, which is rather specific and involves collecting data from some groups of respondents.

As discussed above, cross-border teaching is valuable in its many aspects. First, it is the result of globalization. According to Varghese [2], “cross-border education is becoming a prerequisite for progress towards a knowledge economy”. In this context, teaching across frontiers implies “the flow of people, culture, ideas, values, knowledge, technology” [3], which has transformative effects on the instructors and beneficiaries and further results in the growing capacity of both sides. Thus, the complexity of the process lies in internationalizing education tools, methods, and approaches to teaching and learning standards. Second, cross-border teaching contributes to achieving national building purposes in terms of education quality and capacity development. When the domestic education capacity does not meet the international demands, cross-border teaching is an excellent option that can cover part of the needs in this section. Likewise, it can encourage cultural identity conservation, increase “international understanding and cross-cultural skills” [4] and promote acceptance of other cultures. This works to the benefit of both: visiting and domestic cultures since they broaden mindsets through communication and high-level skills such as active listening/ reading, critical thinking, creative thinking, etc. which enhance the quality of learning. These skills

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further contribute to the students and academic staff upgrade in terms of their academic activity, fostering internationalization, successful adaptation to a foreign academic environment, and maintaining their capacity over time. Gaining opportunities for experience exchange through academic and scientific mobility can further result in reconsidering learning outcomes and improving the syllabi content and resources that lead to learning quality improvement.

Despite its many benefits, cross-border teaching may be challenging for the visiting teachers as well as for the domestic beneficiaries. Teaching and learning in a foreign environment can be difficult because of cultural differences in terms of flexibility, time management, and a straightforward manner of discussing things. Cultural bumps and difficult adaptation can be one of the reasons. Discrepancies of this kind can occur between representatives of high-context cultures and low-context cultures [5] since they lived in different environments and have different expectations from their counterparts. For the representatives of high context cultures, for instance, the full context is very important in grasping the message. This means that besides words, much consideration is given to how the message is delivered and in what context. High-context cultures assume that the representatives of other cultures also use full contexts to understand messages. Therefore, they leave many things unsaid. This can result in cultural clashes with representatives of low-context cultures who are more explicit in expressing their intentions and expectations through words. The concept of time and its management draws the distinction between monochronic and polychronic cultures described by scholars such as Hall (1984), Tschetschong (2012), Hache (2015), etc. Monochronic cultures take time management very seriously and prefer to do only one thing at a time. They view time as an asset, require punctuality, and are less flexible in scheduling tasks, meetings, and following agendas. Different regards for time can cause discrepancies between monochronic and polychronic cultures, the latter having an easier view of time management, focusing on the task rather than on time, accepting multitasking, and mingling personal and work tasks.

Apart from the distinctions described above, there are many other factors that may cause issues in a cross-border teaching and learning environment such as discrepancies between expectations and reality, “shifting emotional states” [6] that might be experienced by both sides: teachers and students, workload, assessment, grading, etc. Fortunately, these cross-cultural encounters in an educational setting have more advantages due to the mutual interest in experience exchange, upgrade, and knowledge gain of both sides.

## **METHODOLOGY**

One of the most well-known tools for assessing the teachers’ and students’ experiences in the cross-border setting is the survey. The practical part of this research was based on the data collected from two surveys one aiming to illustrate the U.S. perspectives perspective and the other – the students’ perspectives. This method is particularly useful in getting rapid responses from students and from volunteers who are in the country and abroad. The survey questions were designed to measure the following constructs:

- the benefits and challenges the U.S. volunteers gained from their teaching experience when working with students and with the teaching staff and the factors which determined them.
- the benefits, the expectations, and the outcomes of EFL learning with volunteers, from the students’ perspective and the factors which determined them.

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This two-way perspective allows getting a rather objective view of the situation since both sides benefit from the experience. Seventy-nine students studying English (English Philology, English and French Philology) at the Humanities and Pedagogical sciences Faculty participated in the survey. Fourteen U.S. volunteers who came to the Republic of Moldova as Fulbright English Teachers' Assistants or English Language Fellows agreed to participate in the survey and shared their experiences after working with students from the Republic of Moldova. The survey required the respondents to choose from multiple answers, prioritize options or give short answers. For the purpose of analysis, the responses, which unveil cross-border teaching advantages and challenges, were extracted from the survey. They were analyzed together with the recommendations offered by the respondents to build a cause-effect connection between the advantages and difficulties of cross-border teaching, the factors behind them, and the possible solutions for the issues that appeared during the teaching and learning process. Statistical significance was analysed using the graphs automatically created in Google Forms once the responses were recorded. The small number of respondents reduces the overall accuracy of the results. However, the responses have outlined the basic benefits and the factors causing difficulties in EFL teaching and learning in a cross-border setting.

## **RESULTS**

The purpose of the survey was to confirm the hypothesis that the advantages and the challenges of cross-border teaching and learning depend on various factors such as culture, attitude, personal features, teaching style, (inter)national standards of the educational system, etc. These factors determine the outlook on teaching and learning both sides develop or change in a cross-border educational setting. Thus, the first items in the survey for the U.S. volunteers measured the extent to which they reached the goals they set when part of the Fulbright program. The results of the survey showed that the goals which were achieved the most are experience exchange with teachers and students, increasing cross-cultural awareness, gaining experience with foreign teachers and students, taking on a challenge, having fun, meeting new people, promoting cross-border mobility, becoming part of the community, learning new skills, and increasing the quality of teaching in the host country. These goals achievements go along with the goals of cross-border teaching and justify the principles of cross-border education.

The survey taken by students showed that improving language skills, trying new ways of learning, learning new things about the American culture, and having interesting classes were among their highest expectations. The good point is that there is a connection between the students' expectations and the U.S. volunteers' goals which proves the cross-border education goals' sustainability.

Further analysis showed that both sides had their difficulties during the teaching and learning process. The U.S. volunteers acknowledged having some difficulties when working with students and with the host institution. Poor attendance and a relaxed attitude to learning are viewed as the most prominent issues when working with students which impede learners' progress in EFL. The instructors are worried and confused about the factors which determine low attendance rates. Other issues highlighted by the U.S. volunteers are plagiarism, different language levels, and insufficient resources. There is an obvious relation between poor attendance, attitude, plagiarism, and insufficient resources since they can result from each other or bring a common effect – decreasing the quality of EFL learning. The issues with the host institution that most of the volunteers refer to are related to the heavy workload and the

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little guidance from the host institution. It can be thus concluded that there is not always good orientation from the host institution which should offer more time for adaptation and reduce the workload, especially at the beginning of the programme. In small institutions, the workload is overwhelming because of the shortage of staff therefore the workload sometimes exceeds the number of hours the volunteers expect to run at the beginning of the programme. Yet, most of them are involved in co-teaching courses where they share the workload with the host university lecturers. Likewise, volunteers admitted having some emotional issues. Emotional issues often come along with cross-border academic mobility. The U.S. volunteers who took the survey acknowledged a high rate of stress and homesickness when abroad. Some of them struggled with anxiety and depression during the programme. There might be various reasons behind the emotional issues ranging from cultural bumps, overwhelming workload, issues when working with students, and personal issues that heighten because of the foreign culture and working setting.

Some students, who participated in the survey admitted to having some difficulties as well. The central issues are related to time management and tough deadlines. This is a culturally routed problem, which is specific to high-context cultures and results in delaying tasks and missing deadlines. Another culturally specific reason is multitasking. Many undergraduates study at two universities, work and grow children and this often results in a loss of focus, low attendance, missing deadlines, and therefore slow progress. Assessment and grading are other issues that make a difference in cross-border teaching and learning. Following the modern guidelines and standards of test design, formative assessment, and the radical attitude to plagiarism makes the attitudinal adaptation more difficult. However, it teaches the students to set priorities, manage their time better, think critically and creatively, and receive the marks they deserve according to carefully designed criteria and grading scores. Some of the difficulties reported apparently by students of beginner level deal with the incapacity to understand rapid connected speech and to adapt to some volunteers' teaching style. This issue appears because of the different language levels of students within the same group. It makes it difficult for the teacher to run joint groups and to diversify tasks for students of different levels. Fortunately, most volunteers confirmed not being restricted in choosing, changing, and adjusting learning content. Moreover, they were encouraged to organize and participate in various extracurricular activities to promote American culture and values. The students who participated in the survey acknowledged the increase in cross-cultural awareness during their classes.

In the final part of the survey, the participants were encouraged to make some recommendations with the purpose of issues remedial and further improvement. It is interesting to note that both sides agree on the necessity to continue the intercultural exchange between the U.S. and the host culture. This will benefit both parties. The volunteers will get a better understanding of the local culture through a longer orientation, host institution support, and active participation in local community activities. To keep a balance between students' expectations and volunteers' understanding of the local education system specificities, both sides should be instructed ahead of time of their responsibilities and provided with the necessary orientation materials prior to arrival. Most students expressed their gratitude and suggested inviting more volunteers, having more classes, more extracurricular activities for volunteering, clubs where they could learn the foreign language and culture in a more natural environment, involve people from the community to strengthen the cross-cultural connections and to learn in an enjoyable and relaxed setting. Some respondents suggested U.S. volunteers give more attention to the local teachers' training so that they can further apply interactive methods and share them with their colleagues. Others recommended involving students in project-based assignments, case studies, and other activities which apply knowledge in

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authentic situations. There have been also suggestions for meeting the students' needs, being more flexible in terms of a deadline extension, adapting content to various levels, reducing the amount of homework, being more explicit in giving tasks, and in communicating with students of beginner level.

In summary, the collected data analyses prove that both sides need to strengthen communication and collaboration in cross-border teaching and learning where the host university should act as a mediator offering them all the necessary information and materials. Moreover, the results provide important insights into the cultural, educational, and communicative value of cross-border teaching and learning which benefits both sides.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the current study was to determine the factors behind the benefits and challenges of cross-border teaching and learning from the U.S. volunteers and from the students' perspectives. Furthermore, it aims to develop recommendations that will be useful to consider for cross-border education quality improvement. It appears to be one of the few studies to compare the experiences of the U.S. volunteers teaching Moldovan students with the students' experiences of cross-border education. The study has found that the basic principles of cross-border teaching connect with the volunteers' goals, students' expectations, and their learning outcomes. The role of (inter)cultural awareness in strengthening the relation between goals and outcomes is essential since the cultural exchange is the cornerstone of cross-border education. Cross-border teaching and learning does not only mean expansion, diversity acceptance, and globalization but also an upgrade for smaller countries whose education system was isolated for a long time. Other findings of this research provide insights into the difficulties which come along with cross-border education. As it turned out, many issues derive from each other and can be resolved through orientation, communication, support, and cooperation. There is, therefore, a definite need for cross-border education which has clear goals, globalizes teaching and learning, and provides professional expertise through international collaboration.

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