

## **Technology as a Mediator between the Teacher and the Learner in Fostering Educational Interaction**

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### **Abstract**

The relationship between the teacher and learner has always been an issue under investigation for a plethora of reasons, most important of which is the centrality of this relation in the teaching/learning process. Teachers' characteristics and learners' expectations are essential conditions for positive teacher-learner relations. This reciprocal relationship, known as interaction, can take a number of forms, and is fulfilled via various ways. EFL research greatly emphasizes the advantages of all types of educational interaction and more specifically teacher-student interaction. The traditional form of the latter is classroom interaction which takes place face-to-face. However, the change that is taking place in our world has equally affected our EFL classrooms including the pedagogical practices as well as the materials and media used in teaching. The use of technology has recently become omnipresent in EFL classrooms, and it is used by both teachers and learners. Connecting with their teachers via technology using smart phones or computers, learners can be more engaged in learning and ready for collaboration and positive interaction. This paper aims to investigate EFL teachers' awareness towards incorporating technology for interactional purposes relying on the questionnaire as a means of research. The findings reveal teachers' support and positive attitudes towards the importance of technology for EFL teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** classroom interaction, collaboration, teacher-learner relations, teaching, technology, learning.

## **Introduction**

The various processes which come about in the classroom are definitely believed to pave the way to the success of EFL teaching and learning. Classroom interaction is a central area of EFL research, and this concept is considered as a corner stone in the pedagogical classroom, either among the learners themselves or between the teacher and the learners. It is reported by research that the benefits of classroom interaction are immense, and that for interaction to take place successfully, a number of facets have to be taken into consideration. These conditions, which prevail EFL teaching, would help researchers in understanding the nature of this concept. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century or digital age, as it is referred to, a considerable number of pedagogical components have already started to take new directions in correspondence with the changing situation. The notion of *digital literacy* has widely spread subsequent to the requirements of this era. This has opened new windows on the emergence and evolution of other concepts. The present paper tackles the notion of pedagogical interaction, and the ways of fostering this key component via the use of technological supports.

## **1. Literature Review**

### ***1. Teacher/Learner Relations***

Establishing a positive relationship between the teacher and his students is an unavoidable step for a multiplicity of reasons. Nonetheless, this kind of relationship is faced with many challenges including social and cultural backgrounds of the learners, behavioral issues, class absenteeism, and physical distancing which was aggravated by Covid19 crisis. The most outstanding form of teacher/learner relations is classroom interaction. In plain terms, classroom interaction is a complex issue that could be affected by a diversity of factors including “teacher and learner beliefs, social and cultural background of the teacher and learners, and the psychological aspects of second and foreign language learning” (Tsui, 2001, p. 120).

### ***2. Classroom Interaction***

Interaction is a reciprocal action between the participants in an EFL classroom. It consists of “sharing ideas and opinions, collaborating toward a single goal, or competing to achieve individual goals” (Pica et al., 1993; cited in Nassaji, 2000, p. 245). Due to its place in education, the way of interacting with the learners is considered as an element of high significance (Karakaya,

Ainscough & Chopoorian, 2001). Moreover, the benefits of classroom interaction are many and varied:

- Classroom interaction and negotiation of meaning are of paramount importance for successful language learning (Long, 1996; Oliver, 2002; Pica, 2002).
- The interrelationship between the output of the learners, and the input provided by the teacher and its processing is defined and shaped by classroom interaction (Van Lier, 1996).
- Woolfolk (2004) emphasizes the importance of students' interaction with the teacher or other peers "in order to test their thinking, to be challenged, to receive feedback, and to watch how others work out problems" (p.41).
- Classroom interaction fosters self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation.
- Classroom interaction creates a healthy environment that helps the learners to become more involved in the lessons, and ask more questions.

### ***3. Role of Technology in Education***

Light has been lately shed on technology for its immense role in learning in general, and EFL learning in particular. Undoubtedly, the modern classroom has been characterized by the use of technology in both learning and teaching (Khan, 2013). In this regard, Lemoine, Waller, Garretson and Richardson (2020) state that "the age of technology and the information society are sweeping educators towards a future dependent upon knowing how to function in this new world" (p.80). Indeed, this change in societal habits and practices in general, and in the educational scene in particular has to be practically dealt with for universal benefits. Using technology for instructional/educational purposes has been the focus of research for many years. Wenglinsky (2005) maintains that "educational technology needs to be understood not as an isolated event, but as a piece in the puzzle of how teachers teach and students learn" (pp.4-5). Being, then, an inseparable part of the teaching/learning process, the use of technology is reported to have many advantages (Warschauer, 2000, Kasapoğlu-Akyol, 2010, Gómez, 2016). According to Lemoine, Waller, Garretson and Richardson (2020) "technology is impacting student learning positively. Computers and all the technological innovations that are at an educator's disposal are just tools to help educators

and students find and analyze information” (p.82). This relatively massive agreement on the benefits of technology would propel educators for more technology-related innovations in the field of EFL.

#### ***4. Role of Technology in Promoting Teacher-Student Interaction***

It is imperative to consider the tremendous role technology is playing in education in this era. Teachers’ ways of teaching and learners’ ways of EFL learning have been largely questioned and put under the microscope for investigation in order to get more improvement and amelioration in the field. In a study conducted by Eastman, Rajesh and Easmen (2009) on the use of interactive technology in the classroom, they concluded that “while Interactive Technology may not be able to improve all aspects of learning and the classroom experience, there are significant benefits to adopting Interactive Technology” (p.37). One of the biggest roles technology plays in education is closing the gap between teachers and students’ relations. In other words, technology can function as a mediator between the teacher and the learner. In this regard, Altınay-Gazi and Altınay-Aksal (2017) maintain that “teachers become mediators to enable students to continuously challenge themselves in order to facilitate new knowledge based on experiential and collaborative efforts, technology becomes also mediation mechanism” (p.805). This role of technology as a mediator can foster teachers and students’ relations as well as learning outcomes.

Regarding the aforementioned advantages of interaction at both the psychological and linguistic levels, more attention has to be given to this indispensable practice. Interacting with the learners can take place during the lesson i.e. inside the classroom or outside. This very idea was discussed by Subakir (2017) stating that “educational social interaction is a formal interaction in teaching and learning process in the classroom or outside the classroom” (p. 383). As for as forms of interaction are concerned, face-to-face interaction, which is the traditional and most widely spread form, is gradually being replaced by digital interaction which relies on the use of various technological devices. According to Lumen (2021), “technology provides teachers with an opportunity to connect with their students in a new way. It allows you to open up lines of communication and use the Internet to explain curriculum material in a new way, which can be very helpful to students”. In line with these claims, it can be said that the use of various technological media

and devices for numerous purposes is the upcoming future of education around the globe.

In trying to make technological tools beneficial instead of distracting, the teacher should select the best interactive technological tools whether for explaining the lesson, designing activities, giving feedback, classroom discussion (asking and answering questions), or assessment.

## **2. Methodology**

The present study is descriptive in nature; it primarily relies on the exploration of teachers' attitudes towards the use of technology for interactional purposes.

### **2.1. Research questions**

The technological invasion of our teaching settings has resulted in superseding the traditional forms of interaction by other forms relying on a multiplicity of media and techniques. Incorporating technology in the classroom for interactional purposes can be very supportive and beneficial for EFL learners. On this ground, the study seeks to understand how EFL teachers perceive classroom interaction. It, therefore, aims at finding answers to the subsequent research questions:

1. Are EFL teachers aware of the role of teacher-student interaction?
2. Do EFL teachers use technology for interactional purposes?

### **2.2. Research Tool**

In order to find answers to the previously-stated questions, a Likert scale questionnaire was opted for as a research tool for the conduct of the present study. The questionnaire was prepared by the researcher, and sent to the respondents via their professional e-mails.

### **2.3. Participants**

The teachers' questionnaire was administered to twelve (N=12) teachers of English at the Department of Foreign Languages at the University Centre of Mila. All the questionnaires were fully answered and returned.

### **2.4. Results and discussion**

**Table: Teachers' attitudes towards classroom interaction and the use of technology for interactional purposes**

The results in the above table demonstrate that:

| Items   | Strongly disagree |       | Disagree |       | Agree |       | Strongly agree |       |
|---|-------------------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|----------------|-------|
|   | N                 | %     | N        | %     | N     | %     | N              | %     |
| The teacher is not the only decision-maker in class   | 1                 | 8.33  | 0        | 0     | 7     | 58.33 | 4              | 33.33 |
| The teacher should discuss classroom expectations with his students                                     | 0                 | 0     | 0        | 0     | 4     | 33.33 | 8              | 66.66 |
| It is important to consider the student a partner in the teaching/learning process                      | 0                 | 0     | 0        | 0     | 3     | 25    | 9              | 75    |
| Students should be involved in establishing classroom regulations                                       | 0                 | 0     | 4        | 33.33 | 7     | 58.33 | 1              | 8.33  |
| I should encourage pair work and peer assessment  | 0                 | 0     | 0        | 0     | 5     | 41.66 | 7              | 58.33 |
| I should encourage student-student interactions in class  | 0                 | 0     | 0        | 0     | 5     | 41.66 | 7              | 58.33 |
| I spend time reflecting on appropriate ways of integrating technological tool for classroom interaction | 0                 | 0     | 0        | 0     | 4     | 33.33 | 8              | 66.66 |
| The use of education apps for more support of learning is a good technique                              | 0                 | 0     | 0        | 0     | 4     | 33.33 | 8              | 66.66 |
| I share opinions with my students via social media  | 2                 | 16.66 | 5        | 41.66 | 5     | 41.66 | 0              | 0     |
| I think that the teacher should motivate students to rely on technology for educational purposes        | 0                 | 0     | 0        | 0     | 8     | 66.66 | 4              | 33.33 |
| I support and use digital feedback  | 0                 | 0     | 1        | 8.33  | 9     | 75    | 2              | 16.66 |
| I support and use online assessment   | 0                 | 0     | 5        | 41.66 | 4     | 33.33 | 3              | 25    |
| I believe that digital interaction is replacing face-to-face interaction                                | 0                 | 0     | 3        | 25    | 7     | 58.33 | 2              | 16.66 |
| Technology is of high importance in an EFL classroom  | 0                 | 0     | 0        | 0     | 5     | 41.66 | 7              | 58.33 |

- All the participants' responses clearly reveal their support and positive attitudes towards classroom interaction, in that they either *agree* or *strongly agree* with the suggested statements that target this concept and its features. This clearly indicates that EFL teachers are highly aware of the importance of the interaction and exchange of ideas between all the participants in an EFL class.
- The participants support both teacher-student interaction taking place in the form of discussions, giving feedback, answering questions, etc. and student-student interaction as demonstrated in peer review, pair work, collaboration, etc. These practices match the principles of social constructivism which focus on gaining knowledge through interacting with other people who are more knowledgeable than them.
- **50%** of the respondents disagreed with the statement: ***“Students should be involved in establishing classroom regulations”***. This can be due to their fear of students' lack of responsibility at this age, and inability to make important and sensitive decisions that govern the classroom. Moreover, students can be more flexible and ignorant of the consequences of random classroom decisions. In this regard, teachers seem to be pretty prudent vis-à-vis classroom decision-taking, and regulation issues.
- All the participants seem to be aware of the rapid changes that are taking place in education due to technology and the big role the latter is playing in the educational scene; nonetheless, they are treating the issue of integrating technology in the classroom with care, especially online assessment. Most teachers are not familiar with this mode of evaluation, and are not certain about its consequences in their teaching context.
- The overriding majority have negative attitudes towards ***“sharing opinions with students via social media”***. This could have its reasons in the probable misuse of social media by students. What is more, the misunderstandings that can take place might immensely affect a number of pedagogical issues.
- A big number of teachers have already initiated the integration of technology for EFL teaching. Nonetheless, **8.33 %** of the respondents disagree with the statement: ***“I support and use digital feedback”***, and **41.66 %** of them also disagree with ***“I support and use online assessment”***. This clearly indicates that some EFL teachers are still sticking to the old techniques of delivering feedback, and assessing

their students. Teachers' insufficient training on the use of ICTs, and their negative attitudes towards the integration of technology in education could explain the obtained results.

- As far as digital interaction is concerned, **25%** of the participants disagree with: "***I believe that digital interaction is replacing face-to-face interaction***". This implies that classroom face-to-face interaction is still dominating for one reason or another. This physical presence of the teacher seems to positively affect many aspects of EFL learning. However, the wide spread of technological instruments and educational applications reduced the amount of interaction between the teacher and his learners, in that **75 %** of the teachers taking part in this study reported agreement (**58.33%**) or strong agreement (**16.66%**) with the previous statement.
- All the participants' responses clearly reveal their support and positive attitudes towards the importance of technology for EFL teaching and learning.

## **Conclusion**

Adopted as a pedagogical tool, technology for educational purposes seems to open new horizons for the future of education in Algerian higher education. Being a significant issue in EFL teaching and learning, pedagogical interaction is a feature of EFL classrooms. Even during Covid-19 crisis, interaction between the teacher and his students and between the students themselves persisted thanks to technological media. The latter can be adopted for a wide range of uses like educational interaction inside or outside the classroom. The changes that have been brought about and the innovations that subsequently followed did not neglect interaction. On the contrary, technology has been largely invested for interactional purposes.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest

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