



The Implementation of Collaborative Learning via Virtual Communities in Moroccan Higher Education: A focus on EFL Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the implementation of using collaborative learning via virtual communities in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) with a vision to identify three things: students' perception towards online collaboration, their active participation in virtual learning groups, students' satisfaction with this new strategy of learning, and the relationship between gender and the latter. To answer these questions, the present research adopts a quantitative method using a questionnaire for data gathering and the use of IBM SPSS for data analysis. The findings of the present study demonstrate that students hold positive attitudes towards online collaborative learning, students are active participants in the online learning process, students are satisfied and able to develop many skills like, problem solving skills, communication skills, and critical thinking skills. Last but not least, the findings also show that gender does not affect the effectiveness of using collaborative learning in virtual communities. Thus, the implementation of this up-dated strategy of learning is useful and needed to fulfill the missing gaps in the traditional ways of teaching/learning English as a foreign language in the Moroccan higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the late of the 21st century, there has been a swift development of technology in education and its use in Morocco, which has paved the way for scholars and researchers in general to make use of various technological devices. Recently, interest in the uses of online communication for language teaching and learning via collaboration in virtual communities has been increasing. Yet, this growing interest in computer-mediated collaborative language learning (CMCLL) has not been matched by sufficient and practical research in the Moroccan context. The choice of the Moroccan context is being done due to the modernization and the rapid changes that are taking place not only in the economic field, but also at the educational policy. Since Morocco is in the process of coping with the new technologies being used in educational settings all over the world, this study will certainly contribute to the field of digital education. Thus, this research also intends to investigate online collaborative learning in virtual communities, namely the extent to which students support this up-dated method of language learning and teaching, and the effectiveness or the degree of satisfaction of students with collaborative learning in virtual communities, taking into account their attitudes.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The problematic issue of this study is to determine whether collaborative learning in virtual communities is effective for teaching and learning English as a foreign language for undergraduate in Morocco. This case study will help researchers to understand if students who belong to virtual groups collaborate in learning or not. It also focuses on the degree of students' satisfaction while collaborating in online learning groups.

1.2. Research Questions

This study aims at answering the following research questions:

- a) To what extent do students' perceptions of online collaborative learning groups motivate them?
- b) To what extent are students satisfied within online collaborative learning groups?
- c) To what extent do students collaborate actively in online learning groups?

1.3. Research objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- a) To contribute to the existing literature concerning online collaborative learning for students in higher education.
- b) To gain familiarity with the phenomenon under study and achieve new insights into it.
- c) To portray accurately the effectiveness of using collaborative learning in virtual communities.
- d) To generate some recommendations that might be applicable to the EFL context in Moroccan higher education.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The following section is intended to clear the grounds for readers and pave the way to the methodology adopted to answer the main questions of this research. It will present a theoretical framework on collaborative learning being used in virtual learning communities and what scholars and previous studies document in the literature.

2.1. Collaborative Learning/ Cooperative Learning

There has been a debate in the literature about collaborative and cooperative learning and how to distinguish between the two terms. Ted Panitz (1996) gives a clear distinction between what collaborative learning means and what cooperative learning stands for by claiming that:

“Collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning and respect the abilities and contributions of their peers... In the collaborative model groups assume almost total responsibility...[whereas] cooperation is a structure of interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of a specific end product or goal through people working together in groups...in the cooperative model the teacher maintains complete control” (Panitz,1996; cited in Roberts, T. S, 2004, p. 190).

The clarification given by Pantiz (1996) reveals that collaborative learning is more concerned with individuals as a group work holding whole responsibility and taking charge of respecting their peers. In other words they have freedom to do whatever they find as interesting without the dominance or the control of the instructor. On the contrary, cooperative learning is described by Pantiz (1996) as a group of people working together so as to fulfill a certain goal set by the teacher who hold a complete control in the learning process via this strategy. Similarly, other scholars have also tackled the issue of defining collaborative learning and separate it from cooperative learning. Dillenbourg, Baker, Blaye and O'Malley (1996) distinguish collaborative learning from cooperative learning by saying that "collaboration involves the mutual engagement of participants in a co-ordinated effort to solve the problem". While cooperative learning "is accomplished by the division of labour among the participants", where each student is responsible for a part of the information required to solve the problem. Differently put, that collaborative learning focuses on the common interest or whose ultimate goal is to fulfill one target, while in cooperative learning the bond is created to work together like in workshops, but each one with a particular aim (Dillenbourg et al., 1996; cited in Roberts, T. S, 2004, p.190).

2.2. Collaborative and Constructivist Learning

Collaborative learning characterizes the social constructivist standpoint on learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of others, including teachers, as mediators of learning. He claimed that learning originates from internalizing meaning during social interaction while using relevant "scaffolding" within the "Zone of Proximal Development". The concept of "scaffolding" as understood by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) asserted that in social interaction, most advanced learners can create supporting conditions for the learning of less competent learners. In other words, they stress the importance of the construction of meaning through supporting conditions that would work for all learners whether competent ones or not. Walker (2001) found that "in tandem learning, when native speakers of two different languages work together to learn each other's language and develop knowledge of the target culture, both partners benefit from the experience"(cited in Rosario Hernández 2009, p.805). That is to say that closed interaction contributes to a well learning process of the target language. Collaborative learning goes beyond working together, and it requires team-work with roles defined to ensure the success of the group (Domingo, 2008). It seems that collaboration in the learning process requires a community cohesion in which learners co-exist and share the same knowledge. Lizzio and Wilson (2006) pointed out that factors contributing to the effectiveness of collaboration include team-building activities, frequency of meetings, and the value that individuals place on the process of learning (goal orientation). The ultimate aim is for students to develop the ability to become autonomous learners and self-directed ones (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Although self-directed learning is regarded as a central concept in education, some critics argue that most of the concept's emphasis has been on external control and management of the learning tasks (Garrison, 1997; Silén & Uhlin, 2008). Garrison (1997) proposes a self-directed model that integrates self-management, self-monitoring or cognitive development, and motivational dimensions. In self-directed learning, students have to display greater awareness of their responsibility as learners by managing their learning and self-monitoring themselves. In short, independent learning is seen as an important factor in language learning even in a collaborative learning environment, there is a need of self-direction that backs up learners' critical thinking skills" (Cited in Rosario Hernández, 2009).

2.3. Team Work Engagement

Teamwork Engagement is an important concept in assessing the quality of a class. Many teaching methods and factors that influence students' engagement in course have been explored for a long time (Fallon, Walsh, & Prendergast, 2013; Parappilly, De Ritter, & Schmidt, 2015). Teamwork engagement is considered as students' active participation in a community, including uploading documents, sharing useful links, proposing new ideas and so on. However, creating successful learning groups is not simply a matter of putting students together. Students cannot automatically become more involved, thoughtful, skilled, or responsible when working together. (Feichtner & Davis, 1984; Cited in Xi Zhang, Yao Meng 2016, p.1-2). In this realm, it is concluded that an effective learning group should be adapted to the unique students, curriculum, and context. While students are collaborative face to face, they are also engaging in virtual learning communities to compensate for some shortcomings of the traditional ways as it would be clearly illustrated in this section.

2.4. Virtual Learning Communities

Learning environments in the Internet come under various names in the literature, for example, learning environments, virtual learning environments, learning communities, or virtual learning communities (Avigail Oren, Rafi Nachmias, David Mioduser, and Orlylaha, 2000, p. 143). The world has transformed into a technology-heavy phase in which knowledge and information are available and easily accessible. Institutions have taken the curriculum from the physical classroom to the Web through "virtual learning communities" which is defined by Heim (1993) as "a real in effect but not in fact". By that definition a virtual community cannot be restricted to a certain physical place, but more than this it has a function or a role to fulfill. The virtual learning community is described by (Avigail Oren, Rafi Nachmias, David Mioduser, and Orlylaha, 2000, p.145) as a place in which the community's activities are performed and based on a developed system of rules and symbols which help members to identify with the place.

Jones (1995) proposes four conditions that a virtual settlement should fulfill which are: "(a) The capacity to manage interactive communication, (b) People who communicate, (c) A place for public interactions, (d) A membership" (p.146). The four conditions developed by Jones shows that a virtual learning community has to be well-structured and to provide a good atmosphere for the members to interact and learn in well-constructed manner. (Jones (1995); cited in Avigail Oren, Rafi Nachmias, David Mioduser, and Orlylaha, 2000). According to Stoeva (2018) through virtual learning communities Teachers can receive opinions and suggestions from their students and colleagues about the way they are teaching. As a result they can improve their teaching methods. By receiving feedback, teachers will have an idea about their weaknesses and mistakes and they will be more motivated, creative and have an inspiration to improve their teaching style.

Stoeva (2018) claimed that the notion of community has changed from homogeneous and unified to fluid meaning that virtual communities of communication are characterized by heterogeneity and students are most of the time anonymous in their profiles. The latter opens the issue of trust building in online communication which is still a facing problem all over the world.

2.5. Collaborative Learning Facilitated by Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-supported collaborative learning is a new wave in learning/teaching languages and which is defined by (Mary Graham and Helen Scarborough (1999, p. 22) define Computer-supported collaborative learning as the online learning environment facilitated via a technological medium and in particular, computer conferencing. For example, is an effective medium to provide the social aspect of learning emphasized with collaborative learning (Mary Graham and Helen Scarborough, 1999). Interaction in online learning community based on exchange of information, requiring members to formulate arguments or reorganize material to introduce new relationships or concepts. Through formulating ideas in their words, and receiving feedback and evaluation from peers, members' knowledge, thinking skills and meanings are socially constructed (Harasim et.al. 1995). Active participation strengthens learning. A learner is regarded as present online only when he or she makes a comment. This is a major principle that determines the active participation of users in an online learning community. On the contrary opinion, "Lurkers", that is those who read but do not comment, are not regarded as part of the learning environment. Online education allows for both place-independent and time independent learning and collaborations (Harasim et.al. 1995). In this vein, those researchers tackle how the participation in online learning communities function and exemplify a measurement that differentiates between the active and the inactive participants.

Harasim et.al. (1995) claim that "the computer-supported collaborative learning is characterized by the "Asynchronous communication" which allows users to participate at a time and at a pace convenient to them and appropriate to the application. Participants can respond immediately or they may elect to respond after taking time to reflect and compose a response thoughtfully. The quality of participation can be greatly improved online" (Harasim et.al. 1995). Thus, (Harasim et.al. 1995) have tackled the issue of interaction by raising asynchronous communication as a quality that helps learners to engage and interact in an immediate feedback. However, Kaye (1992) claims that "the lack of control over turn-taking, and the frequent development of multiple threads of discussion within the same message space, can provide obstacles to effective collaboration". Even if mediated communication develops written communication skills and prepares learners for examinations, it has some shortcomings as stated by Kaye (1992), turn-taking is a barrier for an effective collaborative learning community (Kaye (1992); cited in Mary Graham and Helen Scarborough, 1999: 22)

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. The sample and sampling procedure

The choosing of the sample was done through randomized sampling in which all respondents had an equal opportunity to be selected. The sample of the present study was 60 male and female participants, 10 males and 10 females for S2, 10 males and 10 females for S4, and finally 10 males and 10 females for S6, which means 30 males and 30 females' respondents.

Table 1. The Sample of the Study

University Level	Number of Respondents	
	Males	Females
S2	10	10
S4	10	10
S6	10	10

3.2. The Questionnaire as a Data Gathering Tool

The questionnaire is used with the purpose to collect quantitative data and is of four types: A demographic questionnaire which encompasses three items, respondents are required to determine their “level of education”, choosing one among three options of “Semester 2 (first year)”, “Semester 4 (second year)” or “Semester 6 (third year)”, “Gender” in which respondents have to choose one either male or female and the third last option of the demographics is whether students belong to a virtual group or not. The second set of questions is arranged from question 4 to 11. The questions are measured on the Likert-Scale in which there are four items supposed to be ticked: “always”, “usually”, “sometimes”, and “never”. The questions aim to elicit information on “students’ attitudes towards collaborative learning via virtual communities”. These items include mainly attitudes and perceptions of the respondents. The third set of questions is arranged from question 12 to 17. The questions are also measured on the Likert-Scale in which there are four items supposed to be ticked: “always”, “usually”, “sometimes”, and “never”. The questions aim to elicit information on “student’s active participation in virtual groups via collaboration”. These items mostly contain sharing and feedback as major components that assess students’ active participation. The fourth set of questions is arranged from question 18 to 25. The questions are also measured on the Likert-Scale in which there are five items supposed to be ticked: “strongly agree”, “agree”, “uncertain”, “disagree”, and “strongly disagree”. The questions aim to elicit information on “student’s satisfaction in collaborative learning within virtual communities”. These items typically comprise of satisfaction, self-evaluation, engagement, constructivism, and problem solving and skills.

3.3. Data Analyses Instruments

Systematic data analysis is at the core of research conduct and reporting. The use of accurate and appropriate data analysis tools contributes to the quality of the research study. For the purpose of this study, SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences: IBM Social Sciences Program, Version 20.0) software was used to analyze the data collected. The achieved statistics are categorized among two groups: descriptive and referential. Descriptive statistics include frequencies, means and standard deviation. Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient (α) is calculated to insure the reliability of all the scales as well as all the sectional questions.

4. RESULTS

Table 2. Reliability Statistics of the Questionnaire Items

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.796	.800	25

The table above shows the **Cronbach’s Alpha (Reliability Coefficient)**, which is a test used to assess the consistency between the items of the questionnaire; that is to say the whether the chosen items are reliable or not. Mallery (2003) provides the following rules of thumb: “_ > .9 – Excellent, _ > .8 – Good, _ > .7 –

Acceptable, $\alpha > .6$ – Questionable, $\alpha > .5$ – Poor and $\alpha < .5$ – Unacceptable” (231). The 22 items of the questionnaire of the presentmatch the criterion for adequate internal consistency, since the alpha coefficient $\alpha = .80$ (rounded up from .79).

Table 3. Responses of the Question: Do You Belong to a “Virtual Group”?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	60	100.0	100.0	100.0

The above table shows that the whole chosen sample belong to a virtual group, 60 respondents, representing 100% out of n=60 are all members of virtual groups.

Table 4. Responses of the Stem: I Feel Comfortable in Online Collaborative Learning Groups

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	32	53.3	53.3	53.3
	Usually	21	35.0	35.0	88.3
	Sometimes	1	1.7	1.7	90.0
	Never	6	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Item 4 has to do with, “I feel comfortable in online collaborative learning groups”. The results on this item show that 53.5% (n=60) chose “always” and 35.3% (n=60) ticked “usually”. This shows that the choice of “always” and “usually” outdoes the choice of sometimes and never which both of them represent only 11.7% out of n=60. That is to say that the majority of students feel comfortable in online collaborative learning groups.

Table 5. Responses of the Stem: I Consider Online Collaborative Learning Groups as a Good Way of Learning

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	23	38.3	38.3	38.3
	Usually	18	30.0	30.0	68.3
	Sometimes	18	30.0	30.0	98.3
	Never	1	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

For the item 5 “I consider online collaborative learning groups as a good way of learning”, it has been found that a total of 23 respondents out of (n=60) representing 38.3% of those who “always” consider the online collaborative learning groups as a good way of learning and 30% out of (n=60) who “usually” consider online collaborative learning as a good way, while 30% who “sometimes” consider the online collaborative learning groups as a good way of learning, and 1.7% our of (n=60) who “never” consider online collaborative learning as a good way.

Table 6. Responses of the Stem: I Do Not Like the Atmosphere of Online Learning Groups

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	5	8.3	8.3	8.3
	Usually	7	11.7	11.7	20.0
	Sometimes	10	16.7	16.7	36.7
	Never	38	63.3	63.3	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

For the item 6 “**I do not like the atmosphere of online learning groups**”, it has been found that a total of 5 respondents out of (n=60), representing 8.3% of those who “*always* do not like the atmosphere of online learning groups and 11.7% out of (n=60) who “*usually*” do not like the atmosphere of online learning groups, while 16.7% who “*sometimes* do not like the atmosphere of online learning groups, and 63.3% out of (n=60) who opt for “*never*”, confirming that they like the atmosphere of online learning groups.

4.1. Students’ Active Participation in Virtual Groups via Collaboration

Table 7. Responses of the Stem: I Share Documents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	16	26.7	26.7
	Usually	27	45.0	71.7
	Sometimes	15	25.0	96.7
	Never	2	3.3	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0

As to the results of item 7, “**I share documents**”, it has been concluded that sharing is very interesting in social relationships and learning, item 12 is intended to test whether students share documents online or not. 26.7% (n=60) of the respondents have chosen “*always*” and “*usually*” with 45% (n=60), agree upon sharing documents. A total of 25% (n=60) have ticked “*sometimes*”, and Only 3.3% (n=60) of the population see in the “*never*” scale their choice.

Table 8. Responses of the Stem: I Ask for Help

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	24	40.0	40.0
	Usually	21	35.0	75.0
	Sometimes	14	23.3	98.3
	Never	1	1.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0

For item 8, “**I ask for help**”, it has been concluded that asking for help is very important in learning, item 13 is intended to test whether students ask for help or not. 40% (n=60) of the respondents have chosen “*always*” and “*usually*” with 35% (n=60), agree upon asking for help. A total of 23.3% (n=60) have ticked “*sometimes*”, and Only 1.7% (n=60) of the population see in the “*never*” scale their choice.

Table 9. Responses of the Stem: I Comment on Posts

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	14	23.3	23.3
	Usually	30	50.0	73.3
	Sometimes	13	21.7	95.0
	Never	3	5.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0

For item 9, “**I comment on posts**”, it has been concluded that commenting on posts is very important in learning, item 14 is intended to see whether students comment on posts or not. 23.3% (n=60) of the respondents have chosen “*always*” and “*usually*” with 50% (n=60), agree upon commenting on posts. A

total of 21.7%(n=60) have ticked “sometimes”, and Only 5% (n=60) of the population see in the “never” scale their choice.

Table 10. Responses of the Stem: *I Give Feedback*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	37	61.7	61.7
	Usually	15	25.0	86.7
	Sometimes	8	13.3	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0

For item 17, “**I give feedback**”, it has been concluded that giving feedback is very an essential element in learning, item 17 is intended to see whether students give feedback or not. 61.7% (n=60) of the respondents have chosen “*always*” and “*usually*” with 25% (n=60), agree upon giving feedback. A total of 13.3 %(n=60) have ticked “sometimes”, and none ticked never.

4.2. Students’ Satisfaction in Collaborative Learning Within Virtual Communities

Table 11. Responses of the Stem: *I am Able to Develop Critical Thinking Skills*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	27	45.0	45.0
	Agree	25	41.7	86.7
	Uncertain	8	13.3	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0

Table 11 has to do with, “**I am able to develop critical thinking skills**”. The results on this item show that 45% (n=60) chose “*strongly agree*” and 41.7% (n=60) ticked “*agree*”. This shows that the choice of “strongly agree” and “agree” outdoes the choice of Uncertain disagree, and totally disagree which all of them represent only 13.3% out of n=60. That is to say that the majority of students are able to develop critical thinking skills.

Table 12. Responses of the Stem: *I am Able to Develop Problem Solving Skills*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Stronglyagree	16	26.7	26.7
	Agree	35	58.3	85.0
	Uncertain	8	13.3	98.3
	Disagree	1	1.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0

Table 12 has to do with, “**I am able to develop problem solving skills**”. The results on this item show that 26.7% (n=60) chose “*strongly agree*” and 58.3% (n=60) ticked “*agree*”. This shows that the choice of “strongly agree” and “agree” outperforms the choice of uncertain, disagree, and totally disagree which all of them represent only 15% out of n=60. That is to say that the majority of students are able to develop problem solving skills.

Table 13. Responses of the Stem: I Benefit from Collaborative Learning in Virtual Communities

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	13	21.7	21.7
	Agree	28	46.7	68.3
	Uncertain	18	30.0	98.3
	Disagree	1	1.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0

Table 13 has to do with, “**I benefit from collaborative learning in virtual communities**”. The results on this item show that 21.7% (n=60) chose “*strongly agree*” and 46.7% (n=60) ticked “*agree*”, 30% of the respondents are uncertain, while 1.7% out of n=60 disagree. That is to say that the majority of students benefit from collaborative learning in virtual communities.

Table 14. Responses of the Stem: The Interaction is Enjoyable

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	18	30.0	30.0
	Agree	34	56.7	86.7
	Uncertain	4	6.7	93.3
	Disagree	4	6.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0

Table 14 has to do with, “**The interaction is enjoyable**”. The results on this item show that 30% (n=60) chose “*strongly agree*” and 56.7% (n=60) ticked “*agree*”. This shows that the choice of “strongly agree” and “agree” do better than the choice of uncertain, disagree, and totally disagree which all of them represent only 13.4% out of n=60. That is to say that the majority of students find that the interaction is enjoyable.

Table 15. Responses of the Stem: I am Able to Improve my Communication Skills

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	18	30.0	30.0
	Agree	34	56.7	86.7
	Uncertain	4	6.7	93.3
	Disagree	2	3.3	96.7
	Strongly disagree	2	3.3	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0

Table 15 has to do with, “**I am able to improve my communication skills**”. The results on this item show that 30% (n=60) chose “*strongly agree*” and 56.7% (n=60) ticked “*agree*”. This shows that the choice of “strongly agree” and “agree” do better than the choice of uncertain, disagree, and totally disagree which all of them represent only 12.6% out of n=60. That is to say that the majority of students are able to improve their communication skills.

5. DISCUSSION

As documented in the literature review, researches being done on collaborative learning in virtual communities have proven that its use is very significant to students as I give them another

space or environment where they constructively build their own learning. As to the adopted method for this study, a quantitative research design was followed to gather data from students belonging to those virtual communities as well as to answer the three research questions set for the current study. They mainly revolved around the attitudes of students towards online collaboration, their active engagement practices, and their satisfaction of being a member of these virtual learning communities. For the research question number one “To what extent students’ perceptions of online collaborative learning groups motivate them”, it has been found that the majority of students hold positive attitudes towards collaborative learning in virtual communities. Students feel comfortable and at ease while being in an online learning group. That is to say that collaborative learning gives a positive impression for students to learn, thanks to the large number of the group and the high interaction between members of the group. Thus, the fact that students’ perceptions of online collaborative learning groups is all positive and constructive leads them to actively engage in the learning process. For research question number 3 “do students collaborate actively in online learning groups?”, it has been indicated that students are collaborating actively in online learning groups by sharing documents, commenting on posts, and giving feedback. Thus, students are active members in the virtual learning communities by means of collaborative learning. For the last research question “to what extent are students satisfied within online collaborative learning groups”, it has been found that the majority of students are able to develop critical thinking skills, develop problem solving skills, and communication skills. In this respect, learners are provided with an alternative environment that facilitate the learning process and lead students to be actively engaged within the community and not individually isolated. So, the online learning environment is perceived by those scholars as a community cohesion which enhances the educational level of learners and their critical thinking skills as well. Thus, students prove that by confirming the fact that online collaborative learning helps students a lot in their learning as well as relationship buildings.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study has revealed that the use of virtual learning communities in a language learning context is very useful as it has been shown in the results. Having worked in learning environment that is based on knowledge construction facilitates and helps EFL learners to collaborate and share insights so that they can compensate for their needs in an informal, but constructive learning context. The results of this study have demonstrated that students feel more at ease while being engaged in online learning community because the nature of this technique gives freedom to learners to express freely and build social learning. Its significance in the Moroccan educational policies to teaching and learning English as a foreign language is remarkable as it contributes to the bank of applied research within modern education, and more importantly digital learning. Thus, the usefulness of collaborative learning in virtual communities is undeniable and its implementation is needed in a language teaching and learning context.

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire is intended to collect data that concern a scientific research project. This study aims at trying to find out some alternative strategies for learning/teaching English as a foreign language in Moroccan Higher Education via ***collaborative learning in virtual communities***. I would be thankful if you could possibly respond sincerely to the questions below. Your answers will be confidential and used for academic purposes.

Thank you for collaboration.

I- Demographics

1- Gender

Male Female

2. University Level

S2 S4 S6

3. Do you belong to a “virtual group”?

Yes No

II-Students’ attitudes towards collaborative learning in virtual communities

Statements	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never
4- I feel comfortable in online collaborative learning groups				
5- I consider online collaborative learning groups as a good way of learning				
6- I feel at ease while taking part in online learning communities				
7- I enjoy being a member of an online learning group				
8- I do not like online collaborative learning group				
9- I regard online collaborative learning as a waste of time				
10- I do not like the atmosphere of online learning groups				
11- I find online learning groups as a helpful strategy				

III- Students’ active participation in virtual groups via collaboration

Statements	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never
12- I share documents				
13- I ask for help				
14- I comment on posts				
15- I receive delayed feedback				
16- I receive immediate feedback				
17- I give feedback				

IV- Students' satisfaction in collaborative learning within virtual communities

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
18- I am able to develop critical thinking skills					
19- I am able to develop problem solving skills					
20- I benefit from collaborative learning in virtual communities					
21- The interaction is enjoyable					
22- I am able to easily engage in knowledge construction processes					
23- It enables me to have access to information whenever I want					
24- I am able to improve my communication skills					
25- I am able to get insightful notes from the other members of the online learning group					