

E-Partnership for 21st Century Skills: Launching Global Awareness in Language Learning

تطوير الشراكة الإلكترونية في القرن الحادي والعشرين: نحو عولمة تعلم اللغة Partenariat Électronique pour le 21eme siècle: Vers la mondialisation de l'apprentissage des langues

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Introduction

Man in general is currently living in a globe which is clearly characterised by a *constantly emerging new information and communication technologies* which, in fact, challenge the education sector with novel opportunities. If one looks and considers the profile of our students, one may figure out that they may be described as a 'digital generation', with great expectations from their learning environment. This, in fact, should require changing the way learners learn and teachers teach. Beyond face-to-face classroom, ICTs seem to be at the heart of a transformation of the teaching/learning process in higher education, since it may open up the possibility of generating a community of inquiry and learning.

Adopting a strategic use of new educational technologies in our higher education may enhance teaching/ learning process. Nonetheless, one should be cognisant of the fact that to be effective, new educational technologies need to be supported by innovative pedagogical approaches which in turn enable collaboration, communication and mobility.

Given these preliminary considerations, the major goals of this paper will be to bridge the gap and overcome barriers between universities locally or internationally through e-partnership and e-cooperation by using virtual classrooms which may boost learners' 21st Century skills. Today's students must be able to combine these skills with the effective use of technology to succeed in current and future jobs.

1. E-Learning and Distance Education

It is often assumed that technology-based instruction or E-learning which refers simply to the use of technology to deliver training and educational materials may enable students to learn at their own speed, give and receive feedback from peers and instructors alike. Furthermore, it provides a wide range

of variables within the learning and teaching opportunities. Higher education institutions throughout the world have started adopting a type of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which refers generally to as “*course management systems (CMS) to improve pedagogy*” (Limayem et al.; 2003; Tavangarian et al., 2004; Ifinedo, 2006; 2007a; Ngai et al., 2007).

Consequently, our universities are believed to be of great need to fundamentally address their missions towards possible ways of incorporating information and communication technologies (ICTs) to respond carefully to the current challenges. This is mainly to investigate and assess how our higher educational institutions explore the courses, taking into account the creative and innovative use of new technologies within the teaching /learning process.

Educational technologies are said to be changing very rapidly. This resulted, in fact, newly pedagogical researches aiming at developing curricula that would effectively utilize the latest technologies. In this sense, there seem an existence of four widely recognized, flexible and well-researched and accepted pedagogies for learner-centred technology-supported environments: *convenience and flexibility, contextualization, collaboration and communication and constructive feedback* (Fox et al 2008: 10-11). These may shape the foundation for examining possible future technologies to judge the value of applying new technologies for a better language instruction, and thus a better ongoing academic training.

In this respect, Crystal (2006:271-272) suggests that we are witnessing an ‘*electronic revolution*’ which was bringing about a linguistic revolution. He puts forward the phenomenon of Netspeak in which he believes it is going to ‘*change the way we think*’ about language in a fundamental way, because it is a linguistic singularity – a genuine new medium’.

Furthermore, evidence indicates, that when applied effectively, “technology applications can support higher-order thinking by engaging students in authentic, complex tasks within collaborative learning contexts” (Means, Blando, Olson, Middleton, Morocco, Remz, & Zorfass, 1993). Here lies the importance of incorporating technology in foreign language instruction. This may be put as follows :



Figure N° 1, Technology Application in EFL Instruction

In a more practical way, within the classroom teachers can develop a myriad of technology-supported engaged learning projects that enable students become globally competent and ready to survive in the current digital age, and ready to solve real-world problems, retrieve information from online resources, and connect with experts. Such projects can be adapted for all grade levels. For example, a teacher can make use of e-mail and teleconferencing to connect with experts to solve science problems. Students, in their turn, can gradually use the internet, scanners, and presentation software to plan and deliver information. Online-collaboration tools and software may support *learner autonomy*, and learning-management systems; which are among the communications technologies most expected to improve pedagogy over the next years. Additionally, such advances may lead to profound changes in the way courses are taught, for instance, teaching will become more outcome-based and student-centred, i.e., a shift in instructional paradigms: instead of focusing on memorisation of material by their students, instructors will focus on the application of knowledge to particular problems.

Within higher education context for instance, it is assumed that the issue of large amounts of data is dealt with through the use of electronic and digital teaching and learning systems and tools. In particular, increasingly *visual ways of mapping and navigating information and complex concepts may be put into practice.*

2. Virtual Classrooms: Boosting 21st Century Skills:

It generally acknowledged that mastery of 21st century skills may occur through deliberate instruction, academic training and insurance of quality within the teaching/learning process. Virtual settings inherently are well-equipped to provide expanded and innovative learning opportunities.

With the growing popularity of E-Learning and online education, new terms in education have been introduced to keep pace with the latest technologies like the Virtual Classroom, where students will not be present physically in the classroom but connected to the classroom via Internet. Virtual classroom aims to create the experience of attending a class over the web, i.e., it provides a suitable communication environment for distance learners just like traditional face-to-face classroom. Just like traditional classrooms, a Virtual Classroom is a scheduled, online teacher-led training session where teachers and learners highly interact together using computers linked to the Internet.

Virtual classrooms should prepare and enhance 21st century skills by adopting programs that strengthen the quality of instruction leading to professionalism and success in life and work too.

3. E-Partnership between Universities: the Challenge

Online learning now takes more than one form, including the use of technology to enhance a face-to-face class, a hybrid class that combines both face-to-face meetings and online work, and fully online courses. The web-based Information and Communication Technologies (w-ICTs) have greatly generated the culture of distance learning or online education as a new genre in the bulk of pedagogy literature. The need for partnership and collaboration among universities seems to be one of the challenges in this digital age. E-partnerships allow interaction among universities to exchange points of view and to give and obtain different experiences. In such environment, universities should be expected to work together to generate deeper levels of understanding and critical evaluation of the teaching/learning materials. In the process of seeking out additional materials for this purpose, universities should be expected to share the resources they are finding with the other members of the globe. Another level of collaboration may be to facilitate knowledge exchange between learning communities, for instance, the same course.

Partnership may also be an important booster to learners' 21st skills, it may develop learners' global awareness and competence and direct their own learning path, providing ample opportunities for self-paced and self-directed learning, reinforcing these necessary skills. Virtual schools, on the other hand, are unique in their abilities to empower students in making flexible, individual choices based on their own interests and schedules.

These theoretical principles seem to be interesting, leading to interesting results, oddly enough, one should think about the possibilities to apply and develop our learners' become globally competent, having the necessary 21st century skills. Within an attempt to create collaboration and partnership between universities internationally, a network of videoconferencing connecting universities with each other via two-way video and audio transmissions simultaneously may be of great outcome. Videoconferencing, is also called video conference or videoteleconference, is a set of telecommunication technologies, its purpose is to contribute to the exploitation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in higher education in addition to conducting web-based seminars. It also aims to complement the efforts of governments and education departments to integrate technology into our classrooms and curricula and to link them to the information superhighway. As a concrete representation, one may put the Algerian e-partnership between other universities in the form of Global Virtual Classroom (GVC) between the University of Abu Bekr Belkaid,

Tlemcen and East Carolina USA. The broad mission of this global understanding course is to contribute, develop and facilitate the task of students to acquire knowledge about others' cultures around the world. This project is part of the government efforts to integrate technology into their classrooms and make learners more acquainted with these tools. The Give Something Back International foundation (G.S.B.I) 2003, summarised its objectives as follows :

- a. Cross-cultural Communication Skills
- b. Collaboration
- c. Computer skills

In an increasingly interconnected world, a great number of virtual programmes were created to provide individual, international experiences for the overwhelming majority of students who cannot study abroad. The global understanding course is taught in a shared virtual classroom with students and faculty at 31 universities, in 22 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America. GVC project is a collection of free-online daily video-based activities such as dialogs, chat, and joint student projects to provide personal and global experiences which hopefully open the door for students' prospective about other cultures. this project aims at creating Cross Cultural Communication Skills to overcome culture shocks global communicators, it also offers the opportunity for collaborative and team work among students in different universities. Besides, as this project is based on technological-based tasks, it enhances students' technological competence to be confident and comfortable with technology. This online cooperation may present our learners to the outside world, it will, in all probabilities, broaden their horizons and prepare them to survive in this global village. In this sense, and within this knowledge age, globally competent students should be able to do the following :

1. Investigate the world beyond their immediate environment, framing significant problems and conducting well-crafted and age-appropriate research.
2. Recognize perspectives, others' and their own, articulating and explaining such perspectives thoughtfully and respectfully.
3. Communicate ideas effectively with diverse audiences, bridging geographic, linguistic, ideological, and cultural barriers.
4. Take action to improve conditions, viewing themselves as players in the world and participating reflectively. Boix Mansilla and Jackson. (2013 :11)

In fact, the ability and willingness to compete globally may entail the acquisition/learning of extensive knowledge of international issues. To reach a certain degree of competence, our students need high-level thinking skills, which will gradually improve their creativity and innovation. Students who achieve a thorough understanding of the economic, social, and technological changes existing around them across the globe boost their ability to know how to live and compete worldwide.

It is believed that learners' proficiency in foreign languages is considered as competence. Their ability to understand, read, write, and speak in more than one language will, in all probabilities, enhance their cross-cultural communication skills. The knowledge of additional languages is assumed to open learners' minds to reach an understanding of other cultures and people who speak those languages (Suárez Orozco, 2008).

In today's hyper-connected world, no nation can instigate a fully effective education agenda, without taking into account the global needs and trends, and nurturing a globally competent citizenry. The main goal of our plan is to increase the global competencies of all our teachers to help upgrade our educational system, but the question that it asks itself is that are our teachers ready for such a change? And can learners adapt themselves to different situations?

Consequently, teaching should in any way aim at adapting its objectives according to the increasingly globally competent society. This can be achieved through upgrading and transforming the curriculum, moulding it to meet the needs and requirements of the target university (Gardner, 1999). For instance, some universities begin with training the staff, and learn from experiences teachers, others transform their programs, and others attempt to create newly adopted courses globally orientated. For this reason, a *small* scale study was held to investigate teachers' and learners' awareness about global education, this will be summarised in the following section.

4. Eyes on Reality : Method Discussion

If we take an x-ray to depict the situation, we would straight fully find that we are teaching content, but not teaching students how to use it creatively. And in an attempt to investigate this, a small scale study was held at Tlemcen University – Algeria. The study aims to investigate the degree of awareness among EFL teachers and learners about the significance of 21st century skills within the teaching/learning process.

It is also of great necessity, for any researcher involved in any field of research and classroom investigation, to identify his sample' profile needs and

interests for the sake of constructing systematically the basic knowledge needed for a better research experience. Therefore, this study is concerned with first-year LMD students from Tlemcen University, English Department. 50 of them were randomly chosen. The students involved in this classroom-investigation are in the age group of 17 to 20 years old, they are Baccalaureate holders from different streams (Life and Natural Sciences, Humanities, letters and philosophy and foreign Languages). As they come from government schools, they share roughly the same educational background. Each student had completed 7 years of English study prior to entering university, but they had very few opportunities to practice and speak English outside the four walls of the classroom

Besides, 20 Experienced Teachers of English were interviewed, their teaching experience varies from seven to seventeen years, and they are in charge of the following modules : Linguistics, Research Methodology, Oral Production, Phonetics and Phonology, TEFL, Sociolinguistics and General Psychology.

4.1. Research Tools

It is often believed that the *“The backbone of any survey study is the instrument used for collecting data”* (Dörnyei, 2003). Thus, based on a *multimethod* approach, which requires a multiple sources of data collection, the researcher has designed the present study using students’ Survey and Teachers’ Interviews.

In fact, questionnaires have gained considerable attention in the social sciences. In this line of thought, Dörnyei (2003 :3) states : *“questionnaires are certainly the most often employed data collection devices in statistical work, with the most well-known questionnaire type - the census - being the flagship of every national statistical office”*. For this reason, it was adopted to seek for learners’ general and global skills. Regarding the interview, it provides in-depth information about a particular research issue. It was put by Kvale (1996 : 14) as being an *inter-view*, i.e., *“an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest”*. It was addressed to teachers to know their vision about upgrading the curriculum, globalising the classrooms and their opinion about quality insurance.

4.2. Results

Among the most important findings, I tried to check the matter from the teacher’s stand point and then from the learners’ stand point.

4.2.1. Teachers’ Interview Results

It was found that teachers believe that our learners are unprepared for an increasingly global future, since too many learners lack even the most basic skills for navigating or understanding the critical context of the world events.

Teachers assume that lessons are not designed for problem-solving situations to make learners ready to meet long-term goals, like reflective and creative thinking, but rather based on traditional ways of teaching.

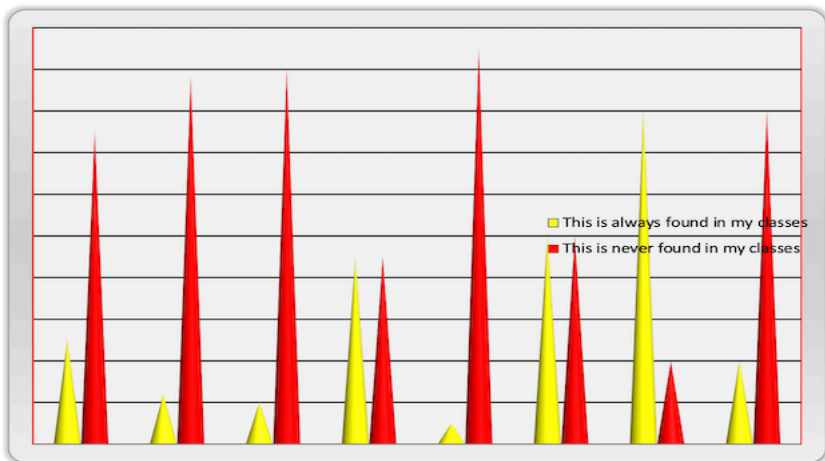
When asked about upgrading the curriculum according to international standards, teachers drew our attention towards quality insurance rather than quantity-based teaching, they believed that quality education should foster :

- a. a confident person who thinks independently and critically and who communicates effectively ;
- b. a self-directed learner who questions, reflects, and takes responsibility for his or her own learning ;
- c. an active contributor who is innovative, takes risks, and strives for excellence ; and,
- d. a concerned citizen who is informed about world and local affairs, has a strong sense of civic responsibilities, and participates actively in improving the lives of others.

4.2.2. Learners' Questionnaire Analysis

Searching for learners' position, it was emphasised on a number of skills needed in the classroom such as problem solving situation, organizational skills, oral communication skills, adaptability skills and analytical skills.

It was found that a number of research skills are always found in the classroom with low percentages, however the others are rarely found in the classroom, as stated in the following bar-graph :



Bar-Graph 1. Learners' Skills in Classroom

Oddly enough, learners seem to be aware of these skills, but reality appears to be challenging and different. Because, to reach this end, a number of measures need to be taken into account such as :

- Training globally-competent Teachers coming from globally-competent institutions,
- Upgrading the curriculum and internalising the content,
- Engaging learners in the world
- Creating partnership between Universities (example GVC),

4.3. Data Discussion

21st century skills are required in our curriculum if change is desired. Though teachers are for the idea of upgrading the curriculum, but it is felt that their traditional methods of teaching will cause great difficulties for them to rethink their ways of teaching. In spite of the challenge, both learners and teachers demonstrate their willingness to change.

4.4.Suggestions

Within such a context, MENA universities can be joined together using a network of videoconferencing through two-way video and audio transmissions simultaneously. The result of these connections is the creation of new terms in education to keep pace with the latest technologies, such as Virtual Classrooms. As a concrete example, the e-partnership between universities such as, Global Virtual Classroom (GVC) between the University of Abu Bekr Belkaid, Tlemcen, ALGERIA and East Carolina University, USA.

This project aims at creating Cross Cultural Communication Skills to overcome culture shocks among global communicators, it also offers the opportunity for collaborative and team work among students in different universities. Besides, as this project is based on technological-based tasks, it enhances students' technological competence to be confident and comfortable with technology. It also aims at :

- Transferring our classrooms into globally oriented classrooms which will create a global vision and culture,
- recruiting and preparing internationally-oriented globally competent teachers,
- transforming curriculum and instruction by integrating international content,
- emphasizing language proficiency,
- expanding students' experiences through harnessing technology,
- creating international cooperation and partnerships.

Conclusions

Considering language as being a remarkable index of pedagogy changing, it would be surprising ; indeed, if such a radically innovative phenomenon ; namely technology did not have a fascinating impact on the way learners learn and grow. However, the feasible combination of technology into education seems reasonably doubtful if it is not carefully integrated the curriculum accompanied by appropriate services, mechanisms and professional development support (Fox, 2003). Within the same line of thought, Collis and Moonen (2001) propose that an important driving force for pedagogical change is technology and that a key-issue in its implementation is how to exploit its power to enhance teaching and learning.

Despite this praise for online learning, there are still considerable structural, psychological, and pedagogical challenges in shifting instruction spontaneously from traditional classrooms. Distance learning remains immature and experimental. Higher education institutions need to innovate and allow distance learning to evolve and develop.

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Abstract

With changing winds and shifting sands, language teaching research has moved its emphasis from traditional classrooms to technology-enhanced classrooms and due to the rapid growth in information and communication technologies together with societal changes, tremendous development in distance language learning opportunities has been launched. Indeed, such a radically innovative phenomenon ; namely technology have had a fascinating impact on the way learners learn and grow, and also on the way teachers teach and develop. Thus, the present paper attempts to reflect upon how distance language programmes may move from traditional print-based correspondence courses, to courses delivered entirely online with extensive opportunities for interaction, feedback and support between teachers and learners, and among the learners themselves. This later may result cooperation and collaboration between universities either locally or internationally.

Keywords

EFL, technology-enhanced classrooms, higher education, e-partnership, virtual classrooms, 21st century skills.

المخلص

حول تعليم اللغة تركيزها من الفصول الدراسية التقليدية إلى الفصول الدراسية المحسنة تقنياً وبسبب النمو السريع لتقنيات المعلومات والاتصالات بالإضافة إلى التغيرات المجتمعية ، تم إطلاق تعلم اللغة عن بعد. في الواقع ، كان لهذه الظاهرة المبتكرة تأثير جذرياً على طريقة التعلم ، وكذلك طريقة تعليم المعلمين وتطويرهم. تحاول هذه المقالة التفكير في كيفية انتقال برامج التعلم عن بعد من الدورات التقليدية إلى الدورات عبر الإنترنت مع إمكانية التفاعل والدعم بين المعلمين والمتعلمين وبين المتعلمين أنفسهم. يمكن أن يؤدي هذا لاحقاً إلى التعاون بين الجامعات محلياً أو دولياً.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الفصول الدراسية المعززة بالتكنولوجيا ، التعليم العالي ، الشراكة الإلكترونية ، الفصول الدراسية الافتراضية ، مهارات القرن الحادي والعشرين.

Résumé

L'enseignement des langues a déplacé son attention sur les classes traditionnelles vers des classes améliorées par la technologie et en raison de la croissance rapide des technologies de l'information et de la communication ainsi que des changements sociétaux, un intéressant développement des possibilités d'apprentissage des langues à distance a été lancé. En effet, un phénomène aussi radicalement innovant a eu un impact fascinant sur la façon dont les apprenants, ainsi que sur la façon dont les enseignants enseignent et se développent. Le présent article tente de réfléchir à la façon dont les programmes à distance peuvent passer des cours traditionnels à des cours dispensés entièrement en ligne avec de nombreuses possibilités d'interaction, de rétroaction et de soutien entre les enseignants et les apprenants, et parmi les apprenants eux-mêmes. Cela peut ultérieurement entraîner une coopération et une collaboration entre les universités au niveau local ou international.

Mots-clés

Salles de classe améliorées par la technologie, enseignement supérieur, partenariat électronique, salles de classe virtuelles, compétences du 21^e siècle.