The Internet : an autonomous learning strategy in the acquisition of the English language for school and university learners in Algeria

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ملخص:

يعود استعمال اللغة المنطوقة في العالم بقدر كبير إلى العديد من مواقع وصفحات الانترنت الخاصة   بالتعلم والتعليم و خاصة تعليم اللغة الانجليزيةالتي أصبحت في متناول الجميع، مع العلم أن الانترنت تساهم في استقلالية التعلم. فالدراسة الحالية تبحث في مدى إمكانية توظيف الانترنت   كوسيلة وأداة تربوية تساعد في استقلالية التعلم و التعلم الفعّال للغة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

مواقع التعلم والتعليم، التعلمالذاتي المباشر ، التعلم المستقل.

Introduction

The growth of the web has become exponential. Consequently it is a potential for new forms of learning strategies through research and independent investigation and inquiry.

This study focuses on the many advantages to the Internet as a tool for self-directed learning. The changes that have been occurring in the educational system and in particular the moves towards student-centred learning resulted in positive attitudes of the learners towards this great tool : Internet. The reduction in the time available for contact teaching and the shift in emphasis from teaching to learning meant that the student was expected to spend an increasing amount of their time in self-directed learning. The Internet was identified as a tool that had the potential to

assist students with these new more flexible learning strategies. Thus, the learner is free to choose the time, the place and the pace for learning.

This study set out to show that the Internet presents a valuable and powerful tool to enable students to engage in independent research and become an autonomous learner. The computer and the Internet , the two major tools of the New Technologies of Information and Communication, have become integral elements and tools in our times. The potentialities they both offer in terms of communication and exchange between different parts of the world make of them the privileged means of access to other people, other cultures and other languages. They are especially useful in the teaching and learning of English as most widely used as the language of expression in the world.

Most importantly, the Internet has also the advantage of establishing a significant framework for individual self-learning. As learners become more conscious of how each one learns and of making decisions about their own learning process, they begin to acquire the ability to become responsible and autonomous learners.

The Internet and Learner Autonomy

One of the arguments, in addition to interactivity, is that the Internet provides learning autonomy. Moreover, Sanz and Villanueva (2002:66) report that during the last twenty years the autonomy of the learner has become a key-concept in the domain of education in general and in language learning in particular. This necessitates a specific emphasis on ' learn how to learn'. As Rogers (1973) points out the

true learning is what a person discovers and appropriates all by himself. This process of autonomous learning is not a modern phenomenon but can be traced back to Socrates. Furthermore, Montaigne and Rousseau emphasize the importance of an individual education and discovery of fundamental notions of the child by himself. As opposed to behaviorism of B. F. Skinner, Piaget opens the era of cognitivism with his theory of constructivism that can be formulated as ' teaching how to learn'.

From a perspective of language teaching, Mangenot (1994) distinguishes four kinds of autonomy :

1. **Physical autonomy** : possibility for the student to learn by following other models rather than the classical 'teacher-learner' interactional pattern ;

2. **Social autonomy** : learning in interaction within a group ;

3**. Linguistic autonomy** : learning the language in order to make something else with it ;

4. **Cognitive autonomy** : learning how to learn by-self.

It can safely be stated that these four forms of autonomy are complementary. Moreover, it could be seen that the same activity could sometimes imply some of these types together. The student studies without the presence of the teacher, or at least, following a model of interaction that isn't a product of a 'student-teacher' interaction. Physical autonomy is the domain to which computers contribute most frequently in autonomous learning. Here the computer :

- Permits the students to study parallel to their rhythms and pace, independent from the others, all being active by means of solicitations of the computer ;

- different styles of learning are respected ;

- in the case of free access without the presence of the teacher, the students do not feel the pressure of time, and may offer themselves supplementary hours.

Internet, thus, is valued for its potential in terms of motivation, stimulation and challenge. It is a student-centered strategy even if the teacher plays a major role in offering support and guidance throughout the process of learning. Learners can work through cooperation with one another or on their own. Hence, gradually they build up confidence, self-esteem, and

autonomy. In fact, contemporary theories of education stress the importance of self-reliance and autonomy as essential bases for real learning.

Learning is most effective when the learner is the initiator of the learning   process (Affagnon, 1990 : 33).

Therefore, one learns most by concentrated self-teaching, with as little interference from the teacher as possible. Language is, in fact, an essentially personal matter based on individual competence.

In fact, about ninety percent of what goes on in most foreign language   classrooms could be accomplished as well as or better by students either   working   by   themselves   with individualized learning materials, or working

with other students or tutors inpairs .(Mc Lean, C. Alan, 1980: 17).

It is suggeted here that the new methods of foreign language acquisition involve independent learning and hence little or no teaching. By encouraging the learner to communicate his own notions, the teacher willingly gives up total control in the language class. Instead of being the prime mover, he becomes a classroom manager or guide. In this case, the learner is encouraged to communicate what comes from within himself rather than from within the teacher.

The profile of a good learner shows that he is actively involved in the   learning process : he listens crefully and checks what he says himself ; he is eager to participate and to communicate with others ; he practices the

language of his own accord. (Showstack, 1980 :7).

By being encouraged to risk error in communicating real thoughts and ideas, the learner builds « inner criteria » about the appropriateness of various language forms for expressing « notions » in the new language. By using the new language for purposeful communication, it is internalized and becomes part of the learner's personal and unique communicative strategy. In this context, the Internet encourages self-learning since it allows the learner to choose his learning style and construct his proper description of the world. Hence, the course structure is built around the learner himself, which would result in a shift in the teaching/learning process from teacher-centered to learner-centered, that is learning to learn.

When involved in his own learning, the learner is no longer is a passive role, but active, as he becomes in charge of his oan training. In this way, the teacher's task becomes that of a facilitator of the learning process. For example, learners are not engaging in immediate repetition of items. Thus they take advantage of the period of silence of the teacher. Silence is also fundamental in language learning. Each period of learning is followed by a period of reflection, the first part of which is conducted in silence. (Cook. V,1982 : 8).

The silence cannot be underestimated in any way for its value and impact on progress in language learning. Far from being a vacuous period of time after the experience part of the class, the silence of the reflection period is characterized

by intensive activity .(Claudio de Moura, Castro et Torkel, A : 209).

The transfer of learning items from short-term memory to the long-term memory is a key psychological process necessary for all learning. Therefore a period of silence between items is needed for their effective storage.

Furthermore, in individual or self-learning, evaluation plays important roles and functions. Evaluation has an essentially regulating role in the learning process. On the basis of evaluation, the learner decides. During the learning process, the learner is constantly self-evaluating in order to know if he is progressing or not. Autonomous learners can direct teir own language learning process. They are able to find learning resources, and identify their learning

strategies. Hence, they can evaluate the development of their own language skills. Here, self-learning programmes aim at improving learners' language output as well as encouraging them to become independent learners. As independent learners, they can learn at home and from a variety of sources. Since learners learn for different reasons, it is basic for the self-learner to choose a syllabus that meets his needs, abilities and interests.(Claudio de Moura, Castro et Torkel, A 1990: 209).

It is therefore, the argument here, that in addition to its usefulness in formal education, the internet has the enormous advantage of being used informally i.e., the learner can continue his learning outside the classroom or at home. Hence, he learns at his own speed and in his own way and in accordance of specific

learning objectives. This implies finding contexts of learning that are meangingful to them. Then, the learner must be trained not only to select specific and personal language objectives, but also to make the possible sources of language information available, e.g., self-access resource centres, reference and authentic material, etc. Learners will also be trained to communicate in a nonacafemic language setting. This will result in learners being less inhibited when dealing with native speakers. (Mc. Lean, C. Alan, 1980 : 19).

However, the transition from learner dependence to independence is not an easy task for the learners as they are used to a system of education where spoon-feeding and rote learning are the traditional teaching strategies. Yet the individualized approach which is a skill-based approach demanding

cognitive interaction is stimulating for the students. Learning with the web implies for the learners to rely on their own judgements and conclusions, as they become gradually independent. Here independent learning does not necessarily mean the exclusion of the group or peer collaboration. In reality, the importance of group creation, group discovery, group negociation and group sharing are important. Group interaction establishes the basis on which individual learning processes of language are strenghthened. At the same time it reinforces social bonds among the learners. In fact, self-learning is emphasized within group learning. Language learning encourages learners to bring their own experiences to the classroom, and in so doing, to take control of their own learning. Mutual support and understanding of each person' s role in group work is

fundamental in individual learning. In face-to-face interaction, students are aware of each other's strength and weaknesses and make them more responsible for their learning. In this way teaching works towards creating a collaborative and interdependent setting in the classroom.

However, group teaching or peer teaching is but one among many possible means towards real autonomy, i.e., the ability to direct one's own learning entirely. Autonomy in learning involves a variety of approaches and activities.

Autonomy is a complex process that includes a recognition of one's own needs, the self-assignment of goals, and the choice and application of the most suitable learning method, to gether with carrying out a

self-evaluation procedure .(Challe. O, 1992 : 139-152).

Peer teaching, then, is a springboard to autonomous learning. Before latting the learner alone with the computer and the web, he should be provided with opportunities to work with others. This because peer or group work will help him to discover his personality and hence, be an efficient independent learner.

 A learner may have the ability to take charge of his learning without necessarily utilizing this ability to the full when he decides to learn. Different degrees of self-direction in learning may result either from different degrees of autonomy of from defferent degrees of exercise of autonomy. Learning may be either entirely or

only partially sel-directed . (Rendom, M. Jo, 1995 : 42).

It follows then that complete autonomy is gradual as it requires an intermediary stage of semi-autonomous learning by way of being helped by the other learners. In this process, for example, in the case of pair work, the students are constantly stimulated and attain the level of their partners more easily than that of the teacher or other language models. Passing through these different stages enables the learners to acquire 'learning know-how' i.e., knowing instinctively what is best for them and how to assimilate it. This is the key element in self-directed learning or self-teaching. (Sionis, C. 1990: 5).

The teacher's role in the classroom then shifts from the classical teacher/textbook model to the more

innovative language/facilitator model. In this situation, the teacher sets tasks around the learners' experiences to conduct continuous evaluatios of the learners to guide them in the learninprocess. Their idea of autonomous and cooperative learning can be accomplished through an exchange of ideas and perspectives that make the learning experience relevant and meaningful to the participants. In such environment, the learners are active managers of their own learning, and the teacher becomes a counselor who creates the adequate environment to promote autonomous learning. (Sionis, C. 1990 : 5).

It is therefore suggested here that the Internet as a useful tool in the learning process necessarily results in the shift of the role of the teacher, from being the interpreter of institutional materials to a language

facilitator. The students are allowed to determine their tasks and choose the programs in accordance with their own interest. In this context, the goal of communicative language teaching is achieved as the students become communicatively competent. (Ruthschoff, B, 1998 : 74-75).

Conclusion and Implications for Teacher Education

The major argument underlined throughout this paper is that, using the New Technologies in foreign language learning enhances not only individual but also group learning. However, these New Technologies, mainly the Internet, will not replace the teacher and neither will they make conventional teaching obsolete. They constitute a useful addition to teaching methods and means. New Technologies in

education, therefore, constitute enriching and enhancing devices, especially in Foreign Language Learning. Because of their increasing impact in the modern society, New Technologies have become a pressing necessity.

The speed of access to the Internet increases considerably day by day and it reaches each office and house more and more. Today's world where the distance and self-directed learning gain importance, we, as educators and language teachers, by using optimally the sources and function of this **'terra incognita'**, have to guide our students and design neatly the learning sites with clear indications and teaching objectives which will enable the learners to acquire the foreign language independently from the behaviorist ideology.

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