

Algerian EFL Course, the Digital Competence, and Critical Thinking Skills

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Abstract

This paper examined the uses of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) in Algerian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course from the perspective of critical thinking. It sought to address issue of the unethical practice of ‘copy and paste’ which plagues most of the learners’ research projects by exploring the ICT skills fostered in the Middle and High school textbooks of English and discussing their pertinence to the implementation of the intellectual competency. For this, the following question was asked: How do Algerian EFL textbooks spell, develop, and/or foster the digital competence? In other words, how are the Internet resources tapped and employed by the Algerian EFL educationists to foster research skills and strengthen cognitive processes leading to critical thinking and autonomy? The exploration of the textbooks has shown that the digital competence in the Algerian EFL course is limited to technical skills, especially as most of the tasks involving the use of the Internet are there to serve solely linguistic and (inter)cultural purposes. Propositions are made, therefore, so as to develop the digital competency in tandem with the intellectual skills.

Key words: Algerian EFL Course, critical thinking, digital competence, Internet skills.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is three-fold:

One, to report on the uses of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) as part of a broader digital competence in the Algerian EFL course through an exploration of Middle and High school textbooks;

Two, to discuss our findings in the light of the need for the implementation of the intellectual competence (critical thinking skills) within the discipline of English as a second foreign language;

Three, to explore areas of innovation and suggest some measures for embedding Internet skills leading to collaborative learning, learning by doing, and critical thinking.

The pertinence of our investigation into the place of the digital competence in the Algerian EFL course is asserted by the controversy among the country's professionals, researchers and teachers alike, over the advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet by young learners in their education. Thus, while for some enthusiasts the use of the Internet in learning is an important means for the youth to keep abreast of the twenty-first century's digital culture, for the majority of educators the young learners' sloppy Internet practices pose intellectual as well as ethical concerns. The latter relate to what can be termed the 'copy and paste syndrome', which seems to have reached pandemic proportions threatening the whole edifice of learning, which should be based on intellectual criteria and comply with high ethical standards.

The increasing dissemination of the digital culture among the youth compared to the reluctance (resistance?) of their elders to take up the digital challenge might suggest that the problem is a generational one, i.e. a kind of a 'generation gap' separating the Internet literate youth from their book literate elders. In our opinion, however, this view is too easy to account for the complexity of the problem, especially as the following important two questions must be considered: do the Algerian EFL curricula and textbooks help install intellectual skills vis-à-vis the use of ICT in terms of critical judgments and evaluation of e-sources? Furthermore, do they sensitize the learners to the ethics of the acquisition of scientific knowledge and its reproduction?

For all these reasons and considerations, it is our intention in this paper to go over the Algerian EFL textbooks having as a main concern the necessity, to borrow the words of the *Québec Education Program* (2004), "to foster the students' respect for ethical standards in the use of ICT and ensure that the educational advantages of ICT are reflected in the intellectual, methodological, social and personal development of every student." (p. 46) For this, we will first review the various meanings and skills associated with the concept of critical thinking in the field of progressive education, and then provide an encompassing definition which embraces the large scope of the digital competence.

Review of the Literature

Critical thinking, also called intellectual skills or intellectual competence, is the hardcore of the constructivist philosophy of education and the competency-based curriculum, such as the one implemented in the Algerian school, and many other Arab countries. A review of the concept associates it with the major philosophers of education in the world, such as John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, Jerome Bruner, Jean Piaget, Lev Semionovitch Vygotski and many others. The link between all these philosophers is their concerns and interests in the ways learners activate intellectual/cognitive processes to learn in real-life contexts, and transfer their knowledge to the wider external world.

Basically, the intellectual competence relates to the learner's ability to face situations of problems by formulating hypotheses, testing them and drawing conclusions from their experiments and/or experiences. This procedure can be expanded in a number of ways and is at the heart of the scientific method. For example, Dewey calls it "reflective enquiry", and Bruner, "critical learning".

What unites all the constructivist perspectives on critical thinking is the concern to put the learner at the centre of the classroom and in an authentic, task-based and problem solving situation of learning, in order to: 1- engage issues pertaining to the real life and negotiate meanings; 2- activate mental/cognitive and metacognitive processes (inferences, comparison and contrast, etc), preferably in a collaborative way; 3- discover connections, make decisions, and construct knowledge(s), identity etc.; 4- integrate different types of knowledge, transfer them to the wider life outside school, and develop the learner's autonomy.

The process of transfer is considered as a fundamental feature of the construction of critical thinking skills. Allieu (quoted in Boisvert, 1999, p. 38) proposes three indicators of transfer:

1- Knowledge should be considered as an intermediate performance objective in the process of learning.

2- Reflection on the thinking process (skills, critical thinking) to construct learners' autonomy.

3- Learning should focus on "wholes/broad areas of learning" not discrete points which do not show the real picture of knowledge.

One broad area of learning which pertains strongly to our 'information age' is communication, whose latest fast development in the modern world has transformed it into a 'global village'. In the field of education, communication has increasingly come to mean during the last years e-learning via the tools of Information and Communications Technologies, in general, and the Internet, in particular. Though e-learning still remains an "evolving concept" which escapes easy definition, the use of ICT in education has already proved to be an efficient means for training, teaching and learning.

The potential of ICT to improve the school performances and learners' habits is tributary to the development of digital competence in teachers and learners alike. Digital competence is defined by the 2008 report of the EU commission on "the use of ICT to support innovation and lifelong learning for all" as being

the confident and critical use of information society technology for work, leisure, learning and communication. It is underpinned by basic skills in ICT and the use of computers to retrieve, assess, store, produce, present, and exchange information, and to communicate and participate in collaborative networks via the Internet." (p. 5)

The relevance of e-learning, in general, and ICT, in particular, to the implementation of the critical thinking skills within the constructivist philosophy and a competency-based curriculum is asserted by many studies in the discipline. For example, the authors of the last quoted report states that "a review of studies carried out for the Commission confirms broad positive benefits of ICT for learning modes such as cognitive processing, independent learning, critical thinking and teamwork and that ICT enhances a student-centred learning approach." (p.

8) This statement prompts us to project the definitions of critical thinking skills and the digital competence on the Algerian EFL textbooks and see what results they yield.

E-learning and Algerian EFL Course: A Description of EFL Textbooks

Within the 2003 educational reform in Algeria, digital culture is introduced in the national EFL course as part of a constructivist curriculum and competency-based textbooks. The latter are articulated around big areas of learning (environment, media etc.) presented in a number of files/units. The files, on their turn, are devised through several and various tasks culminating at the end of each file into a project work. The project work is there to implement, consolidate and capitalize all what was previously learned in the file/unit. It entails a series of task involving collaborative learning, learning by doing, and the mobilization of a set of linguistic, communicative, (inter-) cultural and methodological competencies.

To enable learners perform and present the projects scheduled at the end of every file in the EFL textbooks, the textbook designers encourage them to use the Internet and develop ICT-related skills. For this, they have designed a number of files and preparatory tasks which deal with digital literacy and aim at fostering adequate ICT skills. These files are only two in number and are distributed in two textbooks, *Spotlight on English Book Three* and *At the Crossroads Book One*, designed respectively for the Middle and Secondary schools.

“Communications” is the title of the only unit in *Spotlight on English (book 3)* which seems to address the use of ICT. Its objective is to foster communication-related competencies, considered as an essential methodological foundation for learning. The content of the second task of project one, “Writing a Contribution to a Class Wall Sheet”, relates to e-messaging. It asks learners to write an email, an SMS, an MMS, or search for logos and emoticons. In another task of the same file, learners are introduced to the “Yahoo! Messenger” and are required to find other messaging services (Caramail, MSN ...). Next to that, they are asked to write a user’s guide for the messaging service of their choice. Finally, each student is invited to enter and sign his/her ID.

At the level of secondary education, *At the Crossroads (book1)* shows a similar orientation, since its first file “Signs of the time,” which focuses on lifestyles, is devoted to Internet skills. In this file, stress is made on the following operative objectives:

- different uses of the Internet;
- labeling the components of the computer;
- following instructions for accessing e-mail;
- distinguishing icons and functions;
- reading e-mail addresses;
- reading and understanding e-mails.

All in all, what the exploration of the two textbooks reveals is that the designers limited their scope to **manipulation processing** and basic Internet tasks leading solely to the acquisition of specific linguistic and technical competencies, regardless of the intellectual competency, a competency too much fundamental to be overlooked.

Unfortunately, as our discussion will show, the targeted technical and linguistic skills are far from meeting the increasing digital needs of our time, the least of which requires a research skill leading to keen methodological and trans-curricular competencies, such as critical thinking skills. This critique might be objected and it may be counter-argued that one cannot assess the e-competence fostered many years ago (when the reform was launched in 2005) with today’s developments in digital literacy, because this field is a fast-evolving one. Nonetheless, in our

view, time lag cannot explain all the limitations and anachronisms in the Algerian EFL textbooks in terms of the quality of use of ICT, especially when one has to account for such a case-sensitive competence like critical thinking.

Discussion

To begin our discussion, let us remind that the multiple uses of ICT as a learning tool need always to be adapted to the type of the curriculum and the learning model implemented in the classroom and textbooks. This said, we can observe that, being in nature methodological and trans-curricular competencies based on a learner-centered teaching methodology, ICT are suitable tools for the implementation of a constructivist curriculum and competency-approach to learning. In its 2008 report on the progress of the use of ICT, the EU Commission Staff tells us that, when appropriately embedded, e-learning “can facilitate learning-by-doing, inquiry learning, problem solving strategies, creativity, complex decision-taking” (p. 14) and other processes and competencies at the heart of the constructivist philosophy of learning.

However, if ICT in general fit well within the competency-based approach and task-based teaching methodology in the Algerian curriculum, the learning contents in the English textbooks is far from meeting the requirements in terms of intellectual skills. For, if accessing information definitely enhances learner’s performance and research and is, therefore, the key skill associated with the Internet use, it does not mean, nor does imply, learning.

The first limitation we want to point out in our discussion of the place of digital competence in the Algerian EFL textbooks relates to the teaching of various Internet uses; a teaching procedure which, unfortunately, remains descriptive in essence. Actually, listing different uses of the Internet, asking for opinion about the Internet, or teaching skills for the use of emails, as it is the case in SE1 textbook, is a procedure that does not travel far when placed within the perspectives of both the philosophy of constructivism and contemporary digital culture. Indeed, today, it is commonly acknowledged by practitioners that a constructivist classroom practice revolves around the learning by doing process, on the one hand, and individual processing with an appeal to the individual experience, on the other hand. Surprisingly, however, these two forms of practice are completely overlooked when it comes to embedding the digital competence, since the learners have to wait until the secondary school level in order to be introduced to the basic lesson on labeling the different parts of the computer! This could have been understandable if this basic type of activity responded to the needs of first year Middle School learners who start to learn English for the first time; in the case of secondary school learners, however, it is no less than a sheer pedagogical blunder!

The limitation in the technical competence fostered in the use of ICT extends also to the intellectual competency, the ability to activate cognitive processes in formulating hypotheses, discussing arguments, and drawing conclusions. This competency is at the heart of learners’ attitude to media and learning, because working with the ICT is working with trial and error. To learn through the digital tools, generally, and the Internet, specifically, learners have not only to learn how to tap, collect, store and display information, as done by most of our learners, but also how to analyze, categorize, classify, interpret and integrate digital data in their work. This concern about the tight conjunction between learners’ Internet practices and high order cognitive and/or metacognitive skills is emphasized by the *Québec Education Program* (2004), which underscores the ability of the learners to process information resources, because they are not “of equal value”, and calls on schools to “ensure that students learn how to locate what they are

looking for and that they develop cognitive flexibility required to process and use a broad variety of information effectively.” (p. 36)

Lawless & Brown (1997) refine further the kind of skills sought after the acquisition of the digital competence, by distinguishing two types of users according to the types of interaction with the Internet: the “apathetic users” and the “knowledge seekers”. For this, they have put forward five operations related to learners’ interactions in technology use. These are:

- Browsing: involving the least interactivity as learners have no specific searching goals and tend to take a random path through the e-resources;
- Searching: more interactive involvement with a defined goal (interaction should be inserted within a designed program for uses of ICT);
- Connecting: creating personal links between pieces of information in the system;
- Collecting: identifying and extracting a diversity of materials to reassemble them into another artifact;
- Generating: contributing to the instructional database.

As can be observed from the operations listed above, learners are requested to search for the information, identify it according to their needs, assemble it, link it to their personal views and vision of life, and then create new digital models on the basis of the knowledge they have acquired. In other words, within the process of learning, learners’ acquisition of the digital competence is subordinated to the development of the intellectual skills leading to the construction of their autonomy.

Proficiency in Internet use is, thus, required from learners whose aim is to become autonomous in their lifelong learning and living. ICT provide access to a multitude of information resources and authors. As such, they represent a big potential for research, information processing and exchange. For that reason, there is indeed a need for learners not only to manipulate and use appropriate media, but also to acquire a digital competency which **combines technical with intellectual skills**. In this specific context, ICT skills can be expanded on to mean complex and interconnected cognitive and metacognitive operations, thought of in terms of

the ability to search, collect and process information and use it in a critical and systematic way, assessing relevance and distinguishing the real from the virtual while recognizing the links. Individuals should have skills to use tools to produce, present and understand complex information and the ability to access, search and use Internet-based services. Individuals should also be able to support critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. (European Communities, 2007, p. 7)

In other words, digital/Internet skills imply much more than accessing and tapping specific learning contents in the fields of sciences, culture, entertainment, sports, etc. All in all, therefore, the implementation of the digital competency has to involve specific learning situations where the learners develop efficient strategies to:

- One, carry out efficient and pertinent Web searches by using suitable search engines (such as Google, Bing, Yahoo, etc.) and relevant key words and by targeting appropriate websites;
- Two, perform technical as well as intellectual tasks which range from sourcing, identifying, tapping, to classifying, comparing, selecting, storing, and organizing information in various formats;

- Three, interpret data and transform it into various other forms, using ICT supports, such as PowerPoint slides, Excel spreadsheets, Photoshop etc. and not just Word processor;
- Integrate the gathered knowledge from one discipline to another and transfer it from school to outside school;
- Four, respect copyright and work within Internet license.
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Perspectives and Proposals

As mentioned above, textbook designers did not neglect to integrate some Internet specific activities in the EFL textbooks for the purpose of equipping learners with some basic digital knowledge and abilities. What should be noted, however, is that their interest in digital culture is limited to the **technical strategy** for the use of the Internet. No advice or any explicit information is provided in the textbooks on the evaluation of online information, nor on the use of other media or software. Therefore, the fostering of more digital skills in tandem with high order cognitive and metacognitive skills in the EFL course is required.

Furthermore, the rapid growth during the last years of social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) prompts action by educationists, decision makers and stakeholders alike. And one of the urgent needs is to address the digital divide which separates young learners, on the one hand, from their teachers and school managers, on the other. It is indeed sad to notice that in the Algerian school, the latter (teachers and school managers) lag well behind their students in terms of confidence in, and the quality of, use of ICT. To remedy this problem, decision makers have to support urgently teachers with appropriate training programs and professional development guidelines in the workplace.

Taking up the challenge posed by the digital divide will make it possible for upgrading the digital competence of our schools and, thus, bring positive, innovative and, why not, revolutionary changes to the education sector. This change is expected to occur at least at two levels:

- One, pedagogy: embedding ICT in our schools has the potential to suggest, nurture, and foster novel and effective teaching and learning methods. Researchers in education are therefore invited to engage seriously this field at the levels of both theory and praxis;
- Two, organization: the integration of ICT as tools for learning and teaching will prompt an evolution in the organization and management of our schools towards more modern and more democratic institutions providing quality services.
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Conclusion

Our analysis of the Algerian EFL textbooks has demonstrated that there exists disconnection between the goal set forth for the construction of the digital competency and the procedure implemented to reach that goal, a disconnection that has led to the development of unethical learning habits, such as the practice of 'copy and paste'. To remedy this problem, we suggest broadening the understanding of the digital competence to include **research skills** demanding a **critical use** of information for learning, communication, and interacting. Accordingly, learners should be guided in their attempts to cope with the protean and ever-evolving field of ICT and their increasing demands for more acute and more astute use of intellectual skills. It is only under such condition that learners will acquire high level of e-maturity and demonstrate performance in the quality of their learning in and outside school.

Thanks to the contribution of ICT, learning will no more be regarded within its traditional didactic scope of knowledge transmission; instead, with the new perspective introduced by the new learning modes such as cognitive processing, independent learning, critical thinking, and collaborative learning via teamwork, the learning process will be more in line with the requirements of the contemporary globalized world.

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