Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327
مجلة اللغة الانكليزية في العالم العربي

AWEJ May, 2013 TESOL Sudan Conference2012 Proceedings

Pp.53-60

Launching e-Partnership between Universities: Towards Online Virtual Classrooms

Zakia DJEBBARI
Department of Foreign Languages
Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages
Tlemcen University –Algeria

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.

Key-words: Distance language learning, e-Partnership, e-learning, virtual classroom, online education

Introduction

A new global landscape is emerging as our world currently witnesses a period which may be called "*a digital age*" where countries are trying to catch and utilize amazing technological developments into every area of their technical and social life. It is often assumed that one of the main challenges of current pedagogy is the integration of technology into classroom tasks. Language researchers strongly argue that it appears to be inevitable that, the more a teacher makes use of instructional technology in the classroom, the less teacher-centered and the more student-centered a classroom will become. Currently, due to the ongoing globalization process and other forces, distance learning opportunities are becoming an increasingly noticeable part of educational provision.

Therefore, higher education systems all over the world are challenged nowadays by the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). These technologies have had an enormous influence on the world economy, corporate management and globalization trends, and they bear a tremendous potential to redesign the nature of study environments everywhere. Thus, the desire of many educational institutions to meet new challenges and retain their market share was a motive towards more e-based learning and online pedagogy. Hence, it is no longer a need to spend time defining what online distance learning is or is not; it is now commonplace in higher education. It seems wiser at this level to mention how technological developments have been fused in education throughout history; the following table draws this development clearly:

Table 1. *Developments in Technology Available for Language Learning in Distance Education*

1940s	Educational radio
1950s	16mm film
1960s	Broadcast television (live and pre-taped)
1970s	Audiocassettes
1980s	Live satellite delivery (one-way video, two-way audio) Video compression (two-way video/face-to-face) Videocassettes
1990s	Computer-based education (asynchronous) Interactive multimedia Multimedia conferencing CD-ROM The Internet The WWW Web-based video, audio, multimedia
2000–	Broadband technology Wireless access

Distance Learning and Online Education

With changing winds and shifting sands, language teaching research has moved its emphasis from traditional classrooms to technology-enhanced classrooms which are supposed to promote discovery learning, learner autonomy, and learner-centeredness. The idea of distance language learning in its all diversity does not seem a new phenomenon per say, what makes it appear so is the newest and the ample accessibility of the new technologies for connecting learners and teachers. Distance learning can be seen differently according to the adopted approach. For instance, Shelley (2000: 651) defines Distance learning as an "educational system in which learners can study in a flexible manner in their own time, at the pace of their choice and without requiring face-to-face contact with a teacher. Garrison and Archer (2000: 175) on their part, believe that distance education must involve *"two-way communication between (among) teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process. Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication".* Thus, visions differ according to the specific settled goals when dealing with distance environments.

Distance learning or online education gives an opportunity for education to go beyond the traditional classroom merely by owning a connected computer. It is important to posit that the shift to online distance learning continues to create massive challenges to instructors and their institutions. Strangely enough, a great number of educators still believe that the online classroom is no different from the traditional one, by assuming that the approaches used in face-to-face teaching will work when learners are separated from them and from each other by time and distance, however, when learning moves out of the classroom and into the online arena, teachers need to pay attention to other issues which were taken for granted in the face-to-face classrooms. The following table maps significant differences between the two arenas:

Table 2. *Traditional Vs Online Classrooms*

Traditional and E-learning approaches		
	Traditional Classroom	Online Classroom
Classroom	• Physical – limited size • Synchronous	• Unlimited • Anytime, anywhere
Content	• PowerPoint/transparency/etc • Textbooks/library • Video • Collaboration	• Multimedia / simulation • Digital library • On demand • online Communication
Personalisation	• One learning path	• Learning path and pace determined by learner

Therefore, despite the fact that many educationalists still believe that the growth and delivery of high-quality online education is but a result of learning how to transfer traditional pedagogy to an online environment (Sloboda, 2005), there is little in the literature about how the knowledge and skills associated with high-quality online teaching can be transmitted to the traditional classroom setting. In this line of thought, research over the past two decades reveals that students enrolled in online classes may have greater control over their own learning (Sloboda, 2005), and they experience high levels of interactivity with other students, besides they are able to construct new knowledge (Eastmond, 1998). On the other side of the coin, online learning is popular for almost all types of students in part because of its asynchronous nature, moreover, in online education instructional content can be delivered more cost-efficiently (i.e., Virtual learning environment, Share lessons among schools, e-partnership, Reduce material cost). (Eastmond, 1998; Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K., 2009).

Oddly enough, Warschauer (2000) and Warschauer, Shetzer and Meloni (2000) suggest a number of potential shortcomings in these developments, they are summarized in the following points:

- High quality distance learning opportunities require significant amounts of personal interaction which are expensive to set up and maintain;
- Providers may be under pressure to reduce teacher–student interaction, which requires significant resources, and to place more emphasis on individual access to pre-packaged materials;
- Administrators may seek intellectual property rights for materials and courses produced by teachers to reuse them in distance programmes;
- As the development of distance programmes may be separated from the delivery of learning opportunities, staff may be employed on parttime, temporary contracts which can have long-term effects on their professional status and standing.

The Challenge: E-Partnership between Universities

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

might be delivered at different universities to create a kind of globalizing the curriculum throughout all universities.

In this fashion, a network of videoconferencing connecting universities with each other in order to connect two or more locations to interact via two-way video and audio transmissions simultaneously. 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, this will be discussed in the following section.

Virtual Classrooms

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. Following are some pros and cons of virtual classrooms:

Table 2. *Pros and Cons of Virtual Classroom*

Advantages of Virtual Classroom	**Disadvantages of Virtual Classroom**
- Removal of geographical barriers Anywhere/Anytime	-Teachers and students need to become familiar with the technological tools
-Sessions can be recorded	-Time dependency for Live Sessions
-Quicker to organize	-Technical Limitations
-One to one communication	

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

Global Virtual Classroom: The Algerian Experience

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. The following diagram illustrates this:

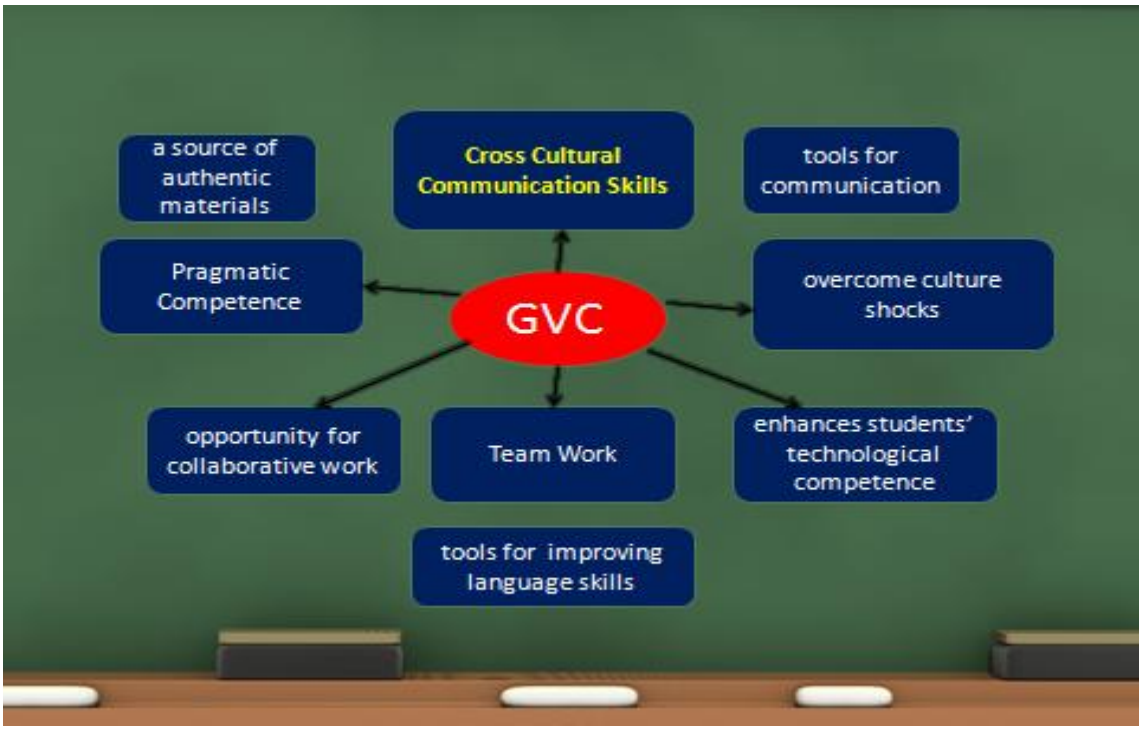

Diagram1. GVC Aims

From another layer of analysis, the GVC permits students to interact and communicate with their partners from different parts of the world about specific topics, in which they prepare each session to talk about. East Carolina University sent a document including the following subjects at the beginning of the fall session so that both learners and their lead teacher prepare to exchange cultural knowledge. Among the proposed topics:

- **College life:**

✓ Describing a typical day for each student in college.

- ✓ Describing the process students had to go through to get into college.
- ✓ Describing the most noticed transition they faced when entering college.

- **Family:**

- ✓ Members of each student's family.
- ✓ Family traditions.
- ✓ The meaning and importance of family to every student.

- **Holidays:**

- ✓ The most important holidays.
- ✓ The way students celebrate their holidays.
- ✓ Activities that students programme in their holidays.

- Culture and Identity:
- Meaning of life and Religion:
- Stereotypes and prejudices:

Conclusion

Based on the fact that the Use of technology especially computers and internet in every area of education enhances language learning, necessary budgets need to be reserved to equip schools with several kinds of technology. Additionally, teacher preparation programs are required to prepare 'technology aware teachers' because tomorrow teachers will be expected to follow and use technological developments in their classrooms.

Instructional technology improves student achievement when integrated into education. However, for this improvement to occur, teachers need to be familiar with computers, have positive attitudes towards computers, be comfortable with the technology and be able to use it effectively. Especially, experienced teachers have difficulty in finding effective uses of computers in their classrooms (Rakes & Casey, 2002).

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.

About the author:

Zakia DJEBBARI is a revercher and teacher at Tlemcen University- Algeria. She is interested in cross-cultural challenges of academic research and speaking in English. She published several ELT articles.

References

AFT (2000). Distance Education: Guidelines for Good Practice. Washington D.C.: American Federation of Teachers.

Arnold, R. (1999). 'Will distance disappear in distance studies? Preliminary considerations on the didactic relevance of proximity and distance', Journal of Distance Education *14*(2), 1–9.

Bates, A.W. (1999). Managing Technological Change: Strategies for Academic Leaders. San-Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Berge, Z. L. (2000). Components of the online classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, *84*, Winter, 23-28.

Chia, R. C. Hall, C. & Smith, K. (2005). Using virtual communication technology to enhance international experience. Paper presented at the National Social Science Association Convention, Las Vegas, April, 2005

Collis, B.& Moonen, J. (2001). Flexible Learning in a Digital World: Experience and Expectations. London: Kogan Page.

Collis, B. & van der Wende, M. (2002). Models of Technology and Change in Higher Education: An International Comparative Survey on the Current and Future Uses of ICT in Higher Education. University of Twente: CHEPS.

Ellis, R. A., Ginns, P., & Piggott, L. (2009). E-learning in higher education: Some key aspects and their relationship to approaches to study. *Higher Education Research & Development, 28*(3), 303-318.

Fox, M. 1998. Breaking down the barriers: Perceptions and practice in technology-mediated distance language acquisition. *ReCALL 10* (1) 59–67.

Gladieux, L.E. and Swail, W.S. (1999). The Virtual University and Educational Opportunity: Issues of Equity and Access for the Next Generation. Washington, D.C.: The College Board.

Salmon, G. 2000. *E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online.* London: Kogan Page.

Schrum, L. 1998. On-line education: a study of emerging pedagogy. In B. Cahoon (ed.) *Adult Learning and the Internet.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Selinger, M. 2000. Opening up new teaching and learning spaces. In T. Evans and D. Nation (eds) *Changing University Teaching: Reflections on creating educational technologies.* London: Kogan Page.