

Towards the Autonomisation of University Student: Evaluation of Palestinian University Students' Perception and Practice of ICT in Foreign Languages' Learning

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative comprehensive research is based on the findings of the content analysis of the Palestinian students' representations and practices of ICT implementation in three university courses of foreign languages in a blended learning mode. Our study is concerned of: "Remedial English" at Birzeit University, developed for RUFO project; "English 1" & "French 1" at An-Najah National University, developed for QIF project. Is it enough to afford digital tools to "digital native" students to ensure a better learning process and a more autonomous learner? In their interviews, students clarified that they faced some troubles managing the learning process. We classified these difficulties into three main aspects related to: personal representations, sociocultural habits and psychological obstacles; pedagogical posture and attitude; and technical difficulties. Findings confirmed that to have a self-reliant student, it's not enough to implement ICT. It is necessary to change the educational paradigm and shift from a teaching-centered model to a learning-centered one.

Keywords: *autonomy, blended learning, constructivism, educational paradigm, university pedagogical innovation.*

INTRODUCTION

Today's students – K through college – represent the first generations to grow up with this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age (Prensky 2001)

Palestinian universities share this point of view with Marc Prensky. However, does ICT integration ensure a better quality of higher education of foreign languages? Is a daily "digital native" student capable to manage his/ her learning process? What are the factors to take in consideration to help autonomize students?

Before we define what we mean by the autonomy of student, we present the notion of "learnig" in a Vygotskian constructivist and socioconstructivist point of view (Gaonac'h 1987, Kohonen 1992). Learning is the activity of knowledge and competencies appropriation and reusing them in contexts other than learning¹. It is "interacting to

¹ Réseau Universitaire en Formation Ouverte et à Distance en Palestine (2004-2009) (University Open and Distance Learning/Teaching Network in Palestine).

² Quality Improvement Fund. (2008).

³ <http://www.meirieu.com/DICTIONNAIRE/dictionnaireliste.htm> consulté en juillet 2012.

build an internal cognitive mode and to develop relationships with the environment; it's interacting with the reality to construct knowledge" (Belise 2003: 23).

Student autonomy is that educational approach that "allows learners to take responsibility and control of their learning and helping them to move gradually from a state of dependence. [...] An autonomizing [course] must therefore develop the ability of the student to be autonomous: "learn to learn", learn to build knowledge and competencies in language" (Blin 1998: 2). The student has, thus, the main role in learning process. The teacher is the guide and facilitator who affords the best conditions for students (Porcher 1998).

We go for the point of view that the student autonomy is a long process to be developed by students. "It's at a time a modality and an objective of learning" (Barbot 2003: 171). This ability of "learning to learn" is not innate" (Barbot 2009: 38). Student autonomy can be developed through learning under certain conditions, but it cannot be prescribed (Linard 2003).

CONTEXT:

"French 1" course, developed for QIF blended learning project (2008): This course is for beginners and (first year students in the Department of French at An-Najah National University and/or a free course for all students of different faculties there.

This course consists of 3 units. The overall objective is to develop some basic knowledge and know-how skills, such as: responding to the instructions of teachers in the classroom; questions asking for explanations using some simple formulas to answer the phone and talk . The course was in blended learning using a book for French as a foreign language "Tout Va Bien", used in the Department of French, with additional materials posted on the platform.

Here is the homepage of the course on Moodle at An-Najah University in Nablus.

Figure 1 : Homepage of « French 1 course on Moodle, on the web site of An-Najah National University

1. « English 1 », developed for QIF blended learning project (2008):

This module is of a course required by all students to get their bachelor degree. It aims at improving language skills and general understanding of written English. It focuses mainly on vocabulary, grammar, and oral production. This course contains six units that were taught for 16 weeks. Each of them contains two writing comprehension texts. Following each text, student checks his/ her understanding through a series of questions. Then grammar exercises follow, and vocabulary ones related to the texts. Finally, it passes to writing production. In the following figure (fig. 2) a screenshot of the home page of the online part of the course.



Figure 2 : Home page of « English 1 » course, on Moodle, the web site of An-Najah National University

2. “Remedial English”, developed for RUFO blended learning project at Birzeit University:

This course is a remedial level which was designed within the project RUFO and was implemented in the Moodle platform of the university first semester of the academic year 2008 / 2009. This course has been designed for students of all specialties of bachelor degree, especially to those who had not got the level of basic language in order to enroll in other English classes.

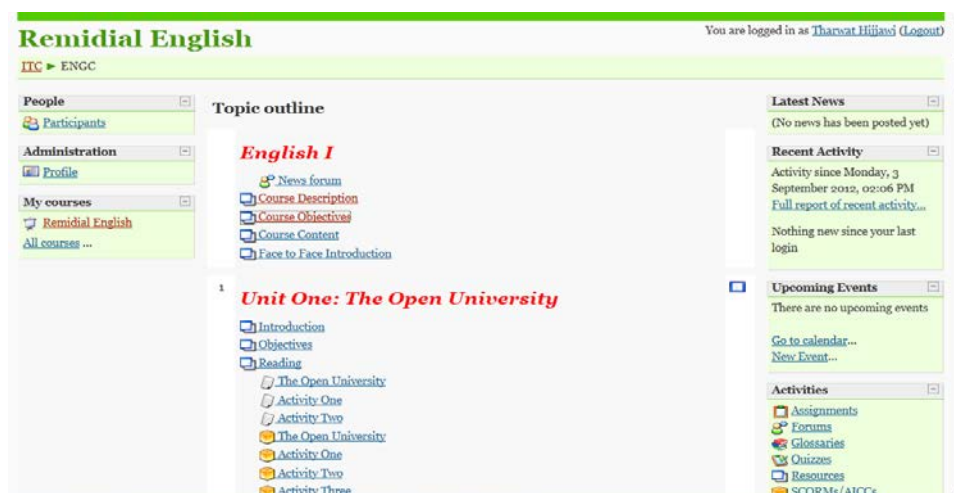


Figure 3 : Home page of « Remedial English » on Moodle, web site of Birzeit University

METHOD:

The research is based on a qualitative and comprehensive methodology. The comprehensive approach aims to reconstruct the world of the meanings of action and thoughts of the actors concerned (Mucchielli 2005: 30).

A content analysis was applied to video and audio interviews conducted with Palestinian students, individually and collectively as part of data for our research of PhD2 (Krippendorff 2004, Bardin 1977).

Our global research of PhD is centered on the innovation of ICT implementation in higher education in Palestine. Since "Innovation is a multidimensional process which connects authors and actors in an adventure in a collective uncertainty" (Cros & Adamczewski 1996: 29). We decided to take in consideration, in a part of our study, the representations and practices of the actors involved in this process.

Our research aims to understand “a practical system (the practices themselves and what connects them: ideologies, symbols, etc.).” (Blanchet and Gotman 2001: 33). We adopt a qualitative approach supported by a

⁴ Hijjawi, T.(2013). *Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Foreign Language Teaching in Palestinian Universities... Yes, but How? Evaluation of policies and pedagogical innovation of ICT integration into the higher Palestinian educational system.*, Lille: University Lille 3 Charles de Gaulle.

constructivist framework. Therefore, we conduct qualitative research that has as its main objective "understanding of phenomena related to education" (Poisson 1990: 15). This is a qualitative field research that "involves personal contact with the subjects of research, mainly through interviews and observation practices in the spaces where the actors change." (Paillé and Mucchielli 2003: 9).

We have based our analysis of representation on semi directive interviews: one video group interview with students of "Remedial English" of RUFO at Birzeit University³. In addition, we have conducted other audio individual interviews in 2010 and 2011 with students of QIF courses. The value of our conversations is "based on the quality of verbal communication that they establish" between the interviewer and the interviewee. To have an optimal communication, "we need both verbal codes" of these "are adjacent to one another" (Mialaret 2004: 54). For this we chose to use the mother tongue of the interviewees (spoken Arabic language).

We analyze the interviews of learners in five categories:

1. Students' profile of use of ICT
2. The added value of blended courses according to them
3. Challenges: between isolation and autonomisation
4. Positive and negative qualities of this method of blended learning from their point of view
5. Interest or resistance

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Considering interviewed students' profiles, we pointed out that all of them (except one single participant) among 12 students have already used the internet and multimedia. Nevertheless, this use was limited to their daily communications and activities: playing, downloading music or films, chatting with friends, or looking up certain information on Google.

Although they use the internet daily, in their interviews, students mentioned that they faced some troubles managing the learning process. In general, they found that it's not simple to learn a foreign language in a blended course. It requires new strategies and more self-dependence. We classified these difficulties into three main aspects: One aspect related to personal representations, sociocultural habits and psychological obstacles; another aspect related to pedagogical posture and attitude; and a third aspect related to technical means and tools.

Representations or sociocultural habits and psychological barriers: Difficulty in managing their learning without the presence of human intervention, the teacher: Palestinian students, in terms of classical and traditional modality are accustomed to face to face learning where the teacher directs everything. But in the online part of the course on Moodle, they find themselves alone in front of the available resources. It is harder for them to take responsibility of their learning which may seem quite 'insecure' for them:

"[...] I had to return so often to the teacher in face to face to get information in order to be able to understand how to do things ..." (L. 2. Q.)⁴

"I did not like it [this experience], I prefer the class. I like to ask the teacher face to face." (L.6. R.)

These examples illustrate that, being deprived of the presence of directive traditional classroom, students have a sense of isolation and distance in this new modality. They are disturbed by the insecurity generated when they found themselves responsible for their learning. For some students, we felt an implicit resistance and denial of this new modality:

"[...] I'd rather be in the classroom with a teacher; I'm used to this" (L. 2. Q.)

"I do not like it because I cannot always know if what I do online is well done or not ..." (L. 2. Q.)

⁵ An interview done in 2009 by pedagogical experts of RUFO project, in which I've been involved first as an observer and then as a researcher.

⁶ We have used « L. » for learner, "R." for RUFO, and "Q." for QIF.

Aspect related to pedagogical postures and attitudes: Difficulties in managing one's learning: a need for human interaction was expressed, so that the learner participates in the construction of a relationship and human enrichment, a relationship of trust, and that even small working groups, student feels able to achieve autonomy:

"The face to face is important to talk and not to be isolated or alone" (L. 6. R.)

"This is a beautiful modern experience, but the face to face is important, it is difficult to learn a new language online ..." (L.1. Q.)

"One can learn many things alone, how to do a sport, ride a bike, but you can never learn a foreign language alone» (L. 2. R.)

"[...] In face to face, I can ask my teacher, but online, I cannot ..." (L. 6. R.)

"... A great experience, but the face to face is also important to identify the body language and gestures of the teacher" (L. 1. Q.)

Moreover we quote here an extract from an interview with a language teacher of a blended course (T. 2. Q)⁵ where he shows that his students from the discipline of computer science also had a problem related to their learning habits and non-technical issues:

"They found several problems: it was easy to navigate and find the online sessions, but they encountered difficulties in listening, they took time to get used to this. Listening is new to them "(T. 2. Q)

Another extract points out that students needed to put in use new strategies that they never used in traditional face to face classes:

"Students do not usually work listening in class, and have no learning strategies related to that language proficiency: This blended learning method demands from learners to make use of a skill that is largely ignored, even at school, the competence of "listening ". It is not easy to learn how to listen, how to understand what we listen to, etc ... « (T. 2. Q)

Moreover, we got the expression of a misunderstanding, destabilization and an attitude of refusal of many students who found themselves in these courses in an authoritarian manner and without their personal agreement, which demonstrates that each learner must be considered in its uniqueness; otherwise all pedagogical efforts are practically canceled:

"I do not agree, we did not choose the university forced us, I wonder if it's legit elsewhere" (L.5. R.)

Furthermore, the coming excerpt shows that with this method, this student has lost self confidence and no longer knows what to do online and what to do in class. He confirms the need for more guidance online:

"I still do not understand what I need to do in order to send the task to the teacher, I am lost, I have chosen a "normal" class, but the university has obliged me to do it in the other class that follows the course of " e-learning" "(L. 2.Q).

Difficulties related to technical means: students need to develop new technical skills to handle tools to ensure their learning and optimize their communication. It also happens that the means available prove to be inadequate or insufficient.

⁷ We used « T. » for teacher. (In this research we are not interested in analyzing the content of teachers' interviews, but for this example related directly to the analysis of difficulties faced by students.

"It was difficult to work online, we need more time, and it does not always work." (L.2.Q).

"There are not enough computers in the computer language lab, we work two or three per computer." (L.2.Q).

"There are web sites that do not open in the Language Laboratory, the Internet is slow" (L.2.Q).

"We had technical problems: it does not come to open the document for reading the text. It is too slow. (L. 7, L. 5, L. 6, L.3. R)

Freedom, independence, and comfort ... valuable assets when difficulties are surmountable: learners do not hide their difficulties, but we see a strong will and motivation among many of them. We will see in the conclusion and recommendation part what proposals and suggestions are to be taken into account to maximize learning and reduce the factors that limit the effectiveness of these blended courses.

A student has confirmed that through his learning in "French 1", and despite it is "primary" according to him, he found himself ready to follow an entirely distant course in international journalism. He believes this modality should not be limited to academics, but it must also be for the whole community. (L. 1. Q.) The following quotes of learners show us that they enjoy the experience despite the negative aspects mentioned: *"I'm comfortable when I work online, all I need is my pc," "I can study even in bed" (L.1. Q.)*

"We have access to more resources» (L. 2. Q.)

I prefer to work with my computer, in classroom time is limited, I can barely have a minute for me" (L. 1.Q.)
Through this difficult experience, I now know how to learn Spanish for example; I can build my career independently" (L.1. Q.)

"It's easier, I can work home, anywhere, at any time, without having to travel from one city to another" (L. 1. R).

"I feel more comfortable [online]" (L.5. R.)

"[I liked] the two, but online, you gain more time...On line, I take my time to reflect and respond to questions, but in class, time is limited" (L.2.R.)

"It is true that the teacher is there in class, but I prefer the online modality" (L. 5. R).

Motivation, commitment, success: we here emphasize on the crucial importance and the role of student motivation. "The concept of motivation includes both affective and cognitive elements that affect personality and external factors [...] If external motivation is very common as a trigger for learning [...] it is not enough." (Barbot 2001: 47). How can we explain the success and positive experiences of some learners when others are blocked by the obstacles or barriers of their environment? Do we not think foremost to encourage internal motivation of the learner? *"So it is desirable to anchor the action of internal cognitive, stronger, motivation in learning, linked to the pleasure of learning, and curiosity" (ibid.).*

This brings us to consider the changes and adaptations to face challenges that teachers should take in consideration when running in these courses.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

From the speech of students we analyzed, we noticed that what hinders learners in the first place is the fact of not being in a directive relationship which is usually a situation of dependence on the teacher. However, they understood the importance of self-management of time and progression of learning and self-assessment to make the most of this training and achieve their goals. However, as we stated in our theoretical support, autonomy is not an «ascertainable pre-requisite », but it is acquired and built progressively during learning (Bourdette and Teutsch 2005: 164). This is why these courses must introduce some tools and resources to maximize the autonomy of the student: an orientation and initiation tool, "zero lesson" for example; a language portfolio (Tagliante 2007: 33), (Manderscheid et Jeunesse 2007: 328); self and co-assessment methods; a metacognition tool (student journal) Paré (1987); "Learn to learn" sessions; and tutoring or coaching on line (Rivens Mompean 2012).

In a blended course, it is important to take in consideration students' learning habits. In a context where they

learn EFL⁶ with traditional and directive pedagogies, teachers play the main role and direct the teaching process. It's not obvious that students can ensure a successful learning. We join the point of view of Marie-José Barbot that confirms:

"A person may need to be guided one day while s/he already claimed her/his independence. Similarly, it is necessary to start from the point where learners are before giving them responsibilities as it may cause a rejection "(Barbot 2000: 24, 25). To overcome resistance (expressed by certain students), the learners need to feel safe, to know they can count on guidance to whom they can refer if they want. "In self-learning, it is not to abandon the learner himself. Instead, install the self-learning environment means developing institutional helping means and interfaces between learner and resources, define new roles for the learner and the teacher, that is to say, to establish human and material mediations adapted to learner."(ibid.: 23).

One way to restore the self confidence of the learner, and to promote autonomy is pair or group work: "Working in small groups is a tool on which to base faster transition to independence, as the group secures and gives confidence [to the student]"(ibid.: 40). Group, pair, and collaborative work were not really taken in consideration in these courses on line. We propose as remediation some tools for group work as the wiki and glossary that are available in Moodle.

The main conclusion is that it is not possible to innovate without changing the educational paradigm and shifting from a teaching-centered model to a learning-centered one (Tardif 1998) that allows more responsibility from the side of student. Student is no more a receptive learner; he's actor, author, and manager of his the learning process (Poisson 2010). ICT means are so often "amplifiers of practices and not generators of change" (Poisson 2000: 18, 22) if we don't empower the student to shift from a transmissive and directive methodology to an active and individualized one.

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⁸ English as a Foreign Language

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