Teaching with Technology: The Place of EFL in Virtual Classrooms

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Abstract

The debate over teaching as a science or an art is still open, but in all the cases, it is always up to the teacher to fix the priorities within the classroom. In this sense, teachers are rather seen as facilitators and adapters at the service of students (Rogers, 2003). Additionally, teaching nowadays is evolving not because of a "different brand new methodology" or teaching approach, but because of the socio-environment of the classroom that has definitely changed with the integration of technology. In order to bridge the gap between digital native students and teachers as digital immigrants, this paper tries to shed light on an interesting virtual experience called "Global Understanding" established for a cultural exchange purpose between the university of Tlemcen in Algeria and three international countries, United States, India and China. A description of how this virtual classroom was tailored is highlighted with results related to students' expectations towards EFL before and after the end of the program.

Keywords: Tele-teaching, virtual classroom, EFL, ICTE

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Introduction

In many universities around the world nowadays, the integration of technology in education is among the top priorities of governments which anticipate expeditious results with an ever increasing rate of success from the students. This extensive exploit of technology in every domain is unavoidable as students are surrounded by web use and internet surfing as a relative matter of fact.

Algeria among other countries faces this new phenomenon as well, and facilities are available in some universities for the purpose of a more effective teaching, enhanced learning and autonomous education. Some teachers adapt their lectures coping with students' needs by handing out new material delivery within the classroom; visual aids mostly include laptops linked to data shows and over head projectors with image sound and movies, enabling the students to deal with the information according to their learning style be it visual, auditory or kinesthetic (also called tactile). Hence, most of the work is still to be done outside the classroom as autonomous learning goes with informal learning. A general notice to the Algerians' diaspora on the internet shows that many are active contributors in social networks but few virtual learning environments are dedicated to Algerian students as a follow up of their educational program since online courses are still limited and blended learning courses are even less available.

Nevertheless, this initiative is a source of inspiration for many teachers as some web tools are used with students who participate actively to this new technology. One may cite forums, blogs, chat, wikis, social networks…etc as an established idea in foreign language classrooms. (Blood, 2000).

In this sense, this paper is a description of the method used as a basis of an interesting cultural exchange experience conducted in English, between the University of Tlemcen in Algeria in partnership with other international institutions (known as Global Understanding) in which web tools were integrated as part of a virtual classroom.

Although the purpose of this classroom is related to cross-cultural communication, all the students expressed an initial action towards learning English (foreign language).

Thus, some practices are highlighted in order to be shared with teachers interested in the 'webosphere' particularly when teacher roles are defined differently in technology-rich learning environments as Tella (1996: 13) called on teachers to be…'courageous enough to step aside from the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side"'.

1. Teachers' Role in Tele-Teaching Classrooms

In any electronic joint project through the net, the exchange relationship between the collaborators is complex and sometimes non-cogent especially at the beginning, since the web setting lacks some features of real life situations such as face to face interaction, body language and eye contact. Cultures may vary from one user to the other and this may result into miscommunication. In a virtual classroom, issues alike are also found and rather more focused on since the virtual partners are not anonymous individuals and the classroom setting is managed and controlled by the teacher. This latter plays a huge part in comparison to the one in a traditional classroom as he definitely feels "frustrated" since he has to add the task of tutor in addition to all the other tasks, which is in fact what Warschauer (1995:53) describes as 'electronic team-teaching partnerships'. Müller-Hartmann (2007) continues and states that in no case technology is meant to replace the teacher, but to put him in the midst of designing the new learning environment and develop professionally, conjointly with his partner teacher(s) abroad, in the process of intercultural projects.

Literature about teacher roles in tele-collaborative projects is innovating and ever changing but best practices that have been recently fixed as successful experiments have flourished in many parts of the world. If we cite the work of Legutke *et al.*, 2006, five general roles are recommended for online teachers; facilitator, pedagogical, social, managerial and technical role. Consequently, the teacher role is paramount for the success of learning in addition to all the synchronous and asynchronous tools that are today new opportunities for intercultural exchanges like podcasts, videocasts, and wikis (see Almeida, 2003). To reinforce this idea, another suggestion for teacher roles is mentioned below:

The idea of team teaching …already highlighted the role of the teacher as an organiser, but also as a learner and as a 'teacher-as-researcher', as teachers experimented with and changed new teaching approaches through observation in their classrooms and in cooperation with their partner teachers.

(Cummins and Sayers, 1995: 126, 137)

The five decisive roles introduced by Legutke et al., 2006 are detailed below as to the way they were applied in the virtual exchange program set in Tlemcen university.

1.1. Teacher as Facilitator

The teacher is expected to be the first facilitator in such experiments in order to be followed by his fellow students. His role is determinant as he has to minimise the difficulties of learning in such a different environment. For the Global Understanding classroom, the first time students stepped into the classroom, the setting was far different from their usual classrooms. The teacher first let them examine all the technical equipments to be used, with different video tests where they chose the most appropriate places to sit in, the most appropriate distance with the camera to be best seen, the suitable screen brightness and fitting volume. In videoconference, seeing their own image and hearing their own voice played back (sometimes with a lag) was easier said than done, this is why once accustomed to their new environment, the teacher often sets up breaks to leave them on their own with the technical assistant to try different sets up.

The teacher than broadcasts a recorded video about a similar past experience where he explains all the steps related to this new classroom and answers all their questions as a way to organise and monitor the classroom. This includes a range of procedures which includes reorganising the time-table, adjusting computer access, setting up different assessment slots, introducing the partner country and guiding them on sensitive topics to be better avoided or the fundamental key points to be tackled. This follows the suggestion of other researchers in the area who highlighted the question of an intensive versus a more laidback approach to monitoring (Müller-Hertmann, 2007; O'Dowd, 2006).

1.2. Which Pedagogy in Tele-teaching Environment?

Pedagogy is the most relevant and significant way in any tele-teaching program since the success of the classroom depends on this professional criterion and therefore needs to be handled qualitatively. First, the teacher sets goals to be achieved during the whole classroom period, but what changes in comparison to a classical classroom are the tools used to achieve these very goals (in this case ICT tools). This method inspired from what Müller-Hartmann (2007) (**Figure 1)** named 'general phases of telecollaborative project', was followed and adapted to the needs of the local student cohort.
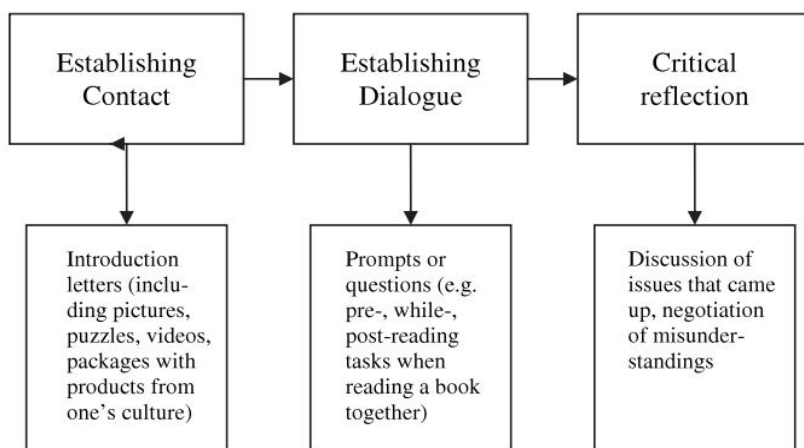
Establishing Contact	→	Establishing Dialogue	→	Critical reflection

Introduction letters (including pictures, puzzles, videos, packages with products from one's culture)	Prompts or questions (e.g. pre-, while-, post-reading tasks when reading a book together)	Discussion of issues that came up, negotiation of misunderstandings

Figure 1 General phases of a telecollaborative project (Müller-Hartmann, 2007)

1.2.1.   Establishing Contact

The described classroom comprises 14 students from each university that meet virtually to discuss different topics related to their culture during a semester. For a purpose of establishing contact, the teacher sets partner-to-partner format according to students' preferences (male-female, or in relation to their specialism…etc), and then processes to emails exchange where the students are required to get in touch with each other before the first videoconferencing link. By exchanging emails the students are required to give a personal introduction about themselves and their culture.

This task is not supervised by the teacher who only gives instructions and encourages the use of web tools and innovation rather than readymade copies from the internet, so the student is free to do it according to his or her preferences and once this is done, the teacher checks both partners' productions. Interestingly, the students do not send a written format email introduction only, but they all include family photos, slideshows, local music excerpts, links to representative videos. Some students start a facebook correspondence while others make personal e-portfolios, blogs, wikis and even podcasts. This helps to prove the motivation of the learners since everyone tries to make an original contribution.

Once the first stage which includes establishing contact over a 5 day period maximum is completed, follows the next one which is the setting up of the classroom using videoconferencing where students interact through a screen as an alternative to face-to-face and thus ice breaking is less difficult.

1.2.2. Establishing Dialogue

Establishing dialogue is another way to mean (and hoping to achieve) a solid contact between the partners where communication is fluid and all the questions asked can be answered spontaneously. The teacher in this phase exposes the topic to be discussed during the videoconferencing link and triggers their curiosity by asking questions that generate other questions. This constitutes a pre-task that takes the learners into their roles as communicators where each one is evaluated upon his participation during the link, the quality of the debate, a good command of the English language, and the logical chronology and discipline of following the discussion as if he was in a real daily life situation. One of the tasks that students have to complete by the end of the semester is to write a report about their experience by comparing/contrasting their culture and the culture of the partner country. This means that they have to take notes during the links and participate actively. Additionally, the learner prepares questions before the link which means that he has to read and search for different information about the link country in order to ask meaningful questions and check the English grammar, vocabulary and style especially when the participant students are from different background (ie biology, English, translation, architecture, computer science, engineering…etc) and the English use in their curriculum is rather limited.

In preparing a link with India for example, the teacher gathered the students and asked them what they knew about this country? What is the language spoken there? if they knew something about the local gastronomy? How is their religion practiced? Do they know any stereotype/ prejudice associated with this country? These are some example questions that generate other questions and make the debate vivid where the students reformulate some queries and wait to confirm or inform them during the link. Also, they are aware that the same questions could be directed to them and thus prepare answers which best fit their role as 'country ambassadors'.

For this purpose, the teacher launches a web forum and educative platform (moodle) where the students discuss their own culture and identify the most important points.

Subsequently, the Global Understanding course exposes students to another learning environment as they meet the teacher twice to discuss and clarify the mistakes they made in the forum and blog posts in the web platform as well as the online interaction with the partner students in the distant country. After one week, the students express readiness, motivation and willingness to work in this virtual environment. (For more information see M.K Meziane & H.Kara Terki, 2011).

This constitutes a 'pre-task' activity, and then it is followed by a 'while-task' which is the videoconferencing session during which the teacher's contribution is limited. The students sit in a U-shape form allowing them to be near each other and for each link; a student leader is designated and whose role is to ensure the participation of every student. During the link, the students have already prepared the questions and are ready to initiate the debate about the topic already set by the two teachers before (college life, family and traditions, stereotypes and prejudices, meaning of life, free topic). As the teacher has previously exposed the vocabulary notes related to the topic (and grammar also) in the web platform forum, this makes it also the right opportunity to understand English use and be understood (use of politeness enquiries, introducing a sensitive topic, joking and easy going language, shifting from a topic to another, respect of discourse interruptions…etc) as proposed by Willis (1996) 'the pre-task phase is meant to prepare the learners for what will come, cognitively, emotionally and from a language point of view, opening a field of awareness'.

The teacher does not interfere during the link even if the students make language mistakes but rather takes notes for the 'post-task' activity. Also, even if the students make those mistakes, they do their best to be understood by reformulating the question or sometimes another student asks the same question differently for more clarification.

1.2.3.   Post-task Reflection

Once the videolink is over, the teacher asks them about their impressions, what was the most interesting part? Whether they learned something new? If there were any striking difference between their culture and their counterparts? How was the communication established between their partners? Did the link match their expectations (overall satisfied or disapppointed)? What needs to be changed /avoided if they had to start over the next time? This is in addition to an introductory discussion about the topic of the next meeting.

This post-task reflection activity is also reported in the web platform where students continue their discussion in their own pace. They also start to collect a considerable amount of information to use at the end for their individual report. The final report which includes audio, pictures and sometimes videos to make it more authentic and representative is then assessed on criteria based on the evaluation from the students, the number of votes, the questions raised in the discussions and the level of the English language used during the interactions.

By the same token, the teacher highlights the quality of the performance made by each during the interactions and the main errors encountered, and proposes together with the students, some corrections and alternatives that need to be taken into consideration. We need to note that this virtual course stresses the importance of oral communication in real-world situations. This reflective correction constitutes an additional opportunity for the students to be exposed to the English language (phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, syntax).

This idea is pointed out by Kramsh (1993:2006) who states that the step of critical thinking or post-task reflection is very linked to the course training where teachers 'need to develop the capacity …to recognize the rupture points in the logic of the explanations brought forth by their students in order to bring cross-cultural aspects of communication to the fore'

1.2.4. Task-based Language Learning

In Tele-teaching classrooms, native speakers of a language connect with other learners of foreign languages making it a good opportunity for students to gain a wider view on language use in an authentic environment, similar to the one experienced by those who visit a country to gain an intensive exposure to the language . In addition, 'Global Understanding' classroom exposes the students to a cultural immersion-like situation. In this context, Task-based language learning (TBLL) provides a rich methodological approach to help teachers deal with courses in tele-teaching programs where culture is taken into consideration. TBLL (Ellis, 2003, Nunan, 2004) involves communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than grammatical form. TBLL centers the use of authentic language on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language while assessment is primarily based on the appropriate completion of tasks rather than on the accuracy of language forms (as broadly defined in Wikipedia, see reference for TBLL link) This makes TBLL especially popular for developing target language fluency and student confidence.

For Willis (2004), in using this methodology, a shift in education occurs from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach. Below is a list of different research findings deduced from Finch, A (2006) :

- language learning, even in a classroom setting, seems to develop independently of instruction
- learners acquire language according to their own inbuilt internal syllabus, regardless of the order in which they are exposed to, particular structures and regardless of mother tongue influences;
- teaching does not and cannot determine the way that the learner's language will develop (citing Skehan, 1996);
- learners do not necessarily learn what teachers teach (citing Allwright, 1984);
- learners do not first acquire language as a structural system and then learn how to use this system in communication, but rather actually discover the system itself in the process of learning how to communicate. (citing Ellis, 2003, p. 14; Willis, 2004, pp. 5- 7)

It is not the aim of this paper to stress the TBLL. The reasons why not all the details related to this methodology are highlighted, but only necessary actions that apply to the cited virtual classroom are put forward.

1.3. Social, Managerial and Technical Role for the Teacher

The social role of the teacher is not necessarily essential in a classical classroom where the approach is rather formal in a constrained setting. In a tele-teaching classroom, being sociable is of considerable importance to help students gain self-confidence in this new environment and cope with their stress. Indeed, this setting adds to their anxiety when talking in a foreign language, meeting new people from a different culture, facing the screen and camera, and therefore students seek assistance from the teacher that they normally don't need in a formal classroom.

Some teachers accustomed to online and virtual courses are no longer addressed to as teachers, but rather tutors, mentors, guides…etc. These new name substitutes for 'teacher' appeal to a change in the way the course is being handled. The atmosphere in a virtual classroom is rather informal and due to the low number of participants, they all interact and have their say. Moreover, the language used in the forums is rather light, does not require a detailed   analysis   and   favours a more spontaneous and interactive approach. The student has a frequent contact with the teacher even outside the classroom since many emails are exchanged during the week (asking for help, clarification, information…etc) as an asynchronous way. The goal of being social teacher is to create a supportive and enjoyable learning atmosphere which encourages discussions and group sharing activities. At the last session of the semester, the students take souvenir photos of their friends and virtual partners as another social activity.

Being managerial teacher is also fundamental since the teacher selects the group leader for every session, forms partner-to- partner pairs which work best, managing time inside the classroom for a balanced speakers' turn, time scheduling, coping with students' absences, avoiding silence breaks during the video link and many other tasks which are nearly inexistent in a classical course.

Although there is a tech helper, the teacher manages extra sessions to make audio/video tests since English is not always spoken by the helpers.

He is also responsible for familiarising the learners with all the technical tools integrated in the course, therefore the teacher needs to be comfortable with the softwares and tools used (web forums, blogs, chats, wikis, podcast…) before integrating them in the course.

The teacher also needs to know some 'emergency tech tips' to be used in case there is an audio lag, a material break, just like rebooting the computer or fixing the camera; these actions are not very complex but always prove to be time savers.

Conclusion

This paper tries to bring into light a successful experience of cultural exchange in a virtual classroom setting conducted in English. The discussions exposed constitute a general description of the methodology and approach used in a technological rich environment where English is the main aim of the students before joining this classroom.

As to cultural exchange, the students gain into self confidence, leadership and open-mindedness. They also change their minds about some ideas held before. They all acknowledge that even if some differences are present between the two cultures, many similarities do exist and makes it a common ground for partners. Some continue to be in contact with their virtual partners especially with all the flourishing social tools found on the web (facebook, skype) and hope to keep this friendship lasting till a real meeting.

Concerning the use of English , this experience is described by many as a virtual linguistic trip where the student faces language used by native speakers and non native speakers like him, every time he is in class where he is expected to speak, understand and be understood in English language only. Writing and reading are found in extra in the forum web platform and therefore the focus is on oral-aural communication. Additionally, if comparing the linguistic corpus of the students (in the emails and forum posts) before and after the program, the level of improvement in the command of the English language reached from these activities is quite noticeable. We need to point out that this linguistic corpus is archived in Tlemcen university platform and may constitute a valuable date for further corpora linguistic research.

The main focus is also on the role of the teacher for the success of this experience, since most teachers of languages who 'venture' into ICT education are not trained for that especially in Algeria (the case study in this paper takes place in Tlemcen University, Algeria) and therefore language teachers working with technology might rely on the roles depicted here as a first step before launching virtual classes.

Finally, teachers need to accept that the traditional roles of the teachers are being re-adapted to fit a changing society in a technological era, as Legutke *et al.*(2006) points out: 'It goes without saying that the traditional roles of the teacher to act as *language instructor* providing language resources and monitoring language use do not cease to be relevant. On the contrary, teachers have to be able to deal with the imponderability and complexity that the expanded space of action entails'.

Note

Special thanks go to Professor R.Chia and Dr N.Mouhadjer for launching this program between Algeria and United States of America.

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