The Use of the Internet in the Integrated English Course: A Proposed Mode of Application

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I t is an undeniable fact that the Internet has established itself as an unavoidable medium of communication in this information age. Therefore, the services that the Internet may offer cannot be overlooked in any EFL curriculum. The urgency of coping with the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) entails the need for new and more complex skills. The assimilation of computer technology in the teaching/ learning process imposes itself as the prerequisite for being abreast with the times. Most particularly, the WWW presents itself as a precious store of information that can boost the learning process to a degree unparalleled in the past. The information society along with the sweeping growth of multimedia forms imposes on us to remedy ICT illiteracy.

The present paper, which is based on a personal assessment of the status of EFL teaching and learning in the department of foreign languages at the university of Annaba, aspires to pinpoint the various anomalies which have persisted for years and, by the same token, pose some solutions made possible by the use of the Internet. My purpose is far from being a plea for the new technology against traditional methods, as both categories should not be superficially addressed and should be viewed as part of the wide educational spectrum deserving equal critical attention. There are in fact opposing views in this regard between those who present learner response to technology as very positive and productive and those who anticipate the problems that may arise when technology is introduced. To Gaer, for example, "Internet communication ... increases self-esteem ... [and] encourages and motivates students" (Gaer, 69). To Johnson, on the other hand, "technophobia is clearly a force to be reckoned with ... Like it or not, computer-assisted learning adds computer anxiety to the other sources of anxiety and stress that learners may be experiencing" (Johnston, 342).[1]

Over the last few years, teachers in our department have been continuously complaining about the difficulties they encounter in their classes. Their grievances are unanimously attributed to the obvious lack of student motivation. Students, who mostly show signs of disinterest and even boredom, do not attend mindfully to the learning process and seem to be working in an high stress/ anxiety level. Even the good students, who are keen on learning the language, become bored with the existing teaching methods. In an oral expression course, for example, teaching students ready-made formulae, such as for greeting or for turning down an invitation to be used in class with their peers, is reminiscent of old methods of learning by heart. When confronted with a real-life situation, the student fails to employ such formulae in default of task authenticity -- i.e. " actual tasks which a person may undertake when communicating through the target language"(Breen, 1987 ,162)

The causes of this situation can be attributed to the fact that the learner himself suffers a kind of "alienation" during the learning process: the outmoded notion of a teacher standing in front of his/her class delivering the lecture seems discouraging, especially with language instruction. Students tend to lose the thread of attention and to mentally evade from the classroom atmosphere. Furthermore, the presence of the teacher as the only interlocutor is no

longer enough for authentic language practice. Since most students do not frequently encounter opportunities to exchange conversations in the target language, the Internet --through its various applications—offers a unique venue for effective language practice. With the learner's involvement in this initiative-oriented learning, the Internet certainly facilitates the shift from the traditional teacher-centred classroom to a student- centred one.

In addition to this, there emerges the possibility of harmonizing the contents and methods of the modules of Oral Skills, Written Expression, Literature, and Civilization and this in order to awaken more interest and involvement from the students' part. In our department, each module is now being taught detachedly from the others and this has created a rift in the students' perception of their training as a whole. Harmonizing the contents and methods of such modules has become quite indispensable. One of my colleagues, who has been teaching English literature for a number of years now, had all along been frustrated by the unavailability of materials on early Anglo-Saxon literature in our libraries which made the study of such a theme superficial and quite sterile. Now, and thanks to the colleague's use of the Internet, access --for instance-- to various versions and adaptations of the long epic poem Beowulf has given her the possibility of bringing the students in close contact with the very early Anglo-Saxon culture with all its facets. More than this, coordination with the Civilization course tutor has made possible the exploration of the afore-mentioned poem from different perspectives, such as its standing vis-à-vis Christianity as well as the Anglo-Saxon code of thanes. The end-of-term assignments which were to be presented both in writing and orally were far more successful with the students who used the Internet. As most of them reported, the websites indicated by the teachers rendered their works highly instructive and enjoyable. Their oral performance was equally far better as they visibly gained a positive attitude from their personal initiative-driven research contribution.[2]

It is quite a challenge that language departments in Algeria are still lagging behind when it comes to the use of ICT in the teaching process. Very few language students and teachers in fact know how to set a computer on and this renders internet access quite remote. Yet, now things have started to improve, as the more students approach graduation level (fourth year) the more they become interested in the Internet. The latter is now by and large perceived as the key to remedy difficulties in obtaining "shelf" materials for the preparation of research projects. Yet, at the Undergraduate level and given the phenomenal growth of the student population coupled with the lack of the necessary infrastructure in terms of new technologies, the use of the internet in a coherent and systematic manner for pedagogical purposes has so far been quite scarce.

On the other hand, at the post-graduate level where teaching is more selective and the student population by far numerically smaller, it has been possible for the author –as director of the Post-graduate Program in American Studies for the academic year 2002-2003- to attempt an experiment with the 11 registered students. It must be borne in mind that eight of them were already using the Internet when the Program started in November 2002 and the remaining three, who felt indirectly compelled to learn how to use this tool, were to invest time and effort to this end. Although it was not intended as an empirical study on the use of the Internet, the experiment has been very promising.

In fact, the whole program with its ambitious axes, ranging from "American culture in the electronic age" to "American foreign policy after 9/11" to "military history," would in no other way have been realizable without the extensive use of the Internet. The urgent need for up-to-date materials was satisfactorily answered by resorting to the relevant search engines and

web directories. The Internet has mainly been used as an on-line library to make up for the unavailability of materials. The use of the net has compensated a good deal for the shortage of specialized literature in the University library.

Students have been introduced to the use of the Internet for research especially in the collection of information and data. They have been guided in the use of different search engines and web directories and in how to browse the Net in an efficient, time-saving way. Here, students have been able to access an abundant wealth of authentic specialized material. [Rebuilding America's Defenses" published in 2000 by the "Project for the New American Century Organization"] The use of the Internet indeed made the students "active meaning-maker[s] and problem-solver[s]" (Williams & Burden, 43). The students have in fact become more comfortable in discussing, either in writing or in speaking, complicated issues, often using specialized vocabulary even with regard to the most pointed topics such as "9/11 and US foreign policy," "the Road Map," "War on Iraq," "The axis of evil," "Technoculture," "Cybersociety" and so on.

Access to hypertexts and hyperlinks, made possible through a simple mouse click, ensured a high degree of flexibility and an attainment of a multitude of perspectives. More significant is the fact that the exploratory nature of these materials allowed students to select, interpret, and reorganise chunks of information into a coherent and cohesive package through reconstruction rather than reproduction of knowledge (Gordon,1996). [One must, however, keep a vigilant eye as to the problem of plagiarism into which students might fall while preparing their assignments or research proposals]

As teacher, I have invested considerable time searching the Net to come up with authentic material for the curriculum. and the suitable web sites for lectures as well as ones to recommend to my students. Without appropriate guidance, students might be overwhelmed by the amount of the information available. Web pages are chosen according to the quality of their contents or to the extent to which they are user-friendly (easy to browse).The first consideration pertains to the quality factor as the contents are supposed to be rich and reliable. The second consideration pertains to the time factor as one cannot afford to waste time on inaccessible sites.

In this, I have made use of the methodical evaluation model that has been set in order to enable teachers to make the right choices while accessing web materials especially with regard to the credibility and reliability of the publishing institution. This model is known as SCAD -- Source evaluation, Contents, Access, Design—(Danielson, 1996).

The experiment has shown that while searching for material on the web, information about the information available –meta-information— should be given along with hyperlinks. At this point, the teacher is supposed to take into account that not all such links lead to the desired results. It is very frequent that the description and presentation of the link is just a trap to attract the browsers. It is therefore highly recommended that the teacher pre-selects sites, with concise summaries of their contents. This safe way of proceeding largely spares a precious amount of time as most students get bored waiting for the appropriate page to appear and be downloaded on the computer. The contents chosen should be error-free, updated, accurate, objective , bias-free and well structured and designed.

Furthermore, online reference materials proved far more efficient and time-saving than the written versions as they could easily be saved, processed, instantly printed, and updated. Not only have such links provided the students with a much needed information to substantiate their training, but also with a highly significant entertainment value. As Katz argues, entertainment is vital to learning in general even in purely conventional schooling.[3]   [e.g.: football and American culture]

The Internet has enabled my M.A. students to widen the spectrum of the skills related to what must be learned and to master the new elements which they were expected to understand. The integration of different skills has been visible: In addition to the information gathered about topics related to American culture, foreign policy, political tradition, or military history, which has made them more at ease in class during the seminars with regard to content, the experience has been of tremendous help to them with regard to their spoken and written English.   The argument that electronic communication provides more writing practice (DiMatteo, 1991) has been sustained by this experiment. The CMC-related applications, such as e-mail exchanges, have fostered the students' writing skills. Most our students' proficiency level is advanced in reading and writing, and intermediate in speaking and listening. Their use of this function allowed them to acquire some authentic oral language formulae. In this way, CMC has in fact accomplished certain complementarities in the learning process. E-mail interactions with the teacher, with each other, and with peers and experts around the world especially native speakers have offered them a type of informal conversational practice which includes a central component that is "negotiation of meaning." E-mail discourse has enhanced the students' reception of implicit and explicit feedback or of "negative evidence" which represents "direct or indirect information about what is ungrammatical" (Long 1996, 413) (Blake, 2000; Pellettieri, 2000; Smith, 2003). It must be borne in mind here that the students – encouraged by the experience—constituted a mailing list accessible by all of them and through it they exchanged information, views and comments.

Students, who have been introduced into the new information and communication technologies, have come into full contact with American culture and institutions, exploring a myriad of authentic materials. This approach, which unfortunately remains limited only to a very small group of learners, fits into modern pedagogical theories, which emphasise the student-centred classroom, learner autonomy, and project-based working.

This new teaching process has enormously attracted the students' attention and stimulated their drive for greater knowledge, adding incentive and interest to their learning process. All students, including those who are usually shy in class, have been keen on actively taking part in the discussion on the different curriculum- related topics instigated and moderated by the teacher (present author). The use of the Internet has certainly given an impressive boost to the program, especially with regard to the updating and substantiation of the information hitherto acquired only from second- or third-hand sources. Underlying the use of the Internet, is the need for students to develop the ability to critically evaluate the materials with which they are presented. This is becoming a crucial issue due to the danger of ''drowning in digital data," Willis (1997).

This process has enabled the teacher to focus in class on the central points and –through the e-mail interactions –to relay background and complementary materials to the attention of the students. The latter, after reading the data, often give feedback and sometimes indulge in intra-group humorous discussions including on the net, but still in relation to the subject. [e.g.: Votes and campaign money in the U.S.]

As observed at an earlier stage of this paper, in addition to providing linguistic input and feedback, learners' interaction with their instructors and with other learners represents a fundamental factor from an affective point of view. As observed from my experiment with the M.A. students, the establishment of positive teacher-learner relationships, and a generally positive classroom atmosphere, has played a fundamental role in fostering their positive perceptions of the learning environment. This has in turn contributed to visibly lowering their anxiety and to fostering their motivation (Burden & Williams, 1998; Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999; Young, 1990) .

The experience does confirm that learners come to perceive the learning environment as a place where assistance can be obtained whenever needed, and where everyone's opinions are respected and valued as contributions to the group's culture.

Notes

[1.] Gaer and Johnston quoted in <u>CALL Environments</u>**:** *__Research, Practice, and Critical Issues__* Eds. Joy Egbert and Elizabeth Hanson-Smith: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. Alexandria, VA (USA), 1999.

[2.] http:/www.lone-star.net/literature/Beowulf/breeden.htm
[3.] E. Katz, Broadcasting in the Third World: Promise and Performance. London: Redwood Burn Ltd, 1978

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