

The Virtual Classroom: A New Avenue in Language Learning, The Case of ‘GVC’ at Tlemcen University

KHELOUFI Souad¹, ZITOUNI Mimouna²

¹University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria.

kheloufi.souad@univ-oran2.dz

²University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria.

zitouni.mimouna@univ-oran2.dz

Received: 10/11/2019,

Accepted: 30/12/2019,

Published: 31/12/2019

ABSTRACT: *The information age or what Warschauer (1999) calls ‘the new industrial revolution’ due to the emergence of internet, paved the way for many domains to prosper, namely the teaching learning environment, the introduction of internet-based social networking tools in second language classes penetrated the world enhancing intercultural competence among students willing to acquire a foreign language. Moreover, this form of social interaction allows them to build strong relationships and online communities of common interests, which leads to a deep understanding of both languages and cultures simultaneously.*

In Algeria, particularly at Tlemcen University, we believe such online tele-collaborative learning fosters intercultural competence. Through a virtual class, local university students interact with their foreign counterparts through social networking platforms in order to grasp the English language in a cultural environment, with this in mind, the present research work aims at exploring whether such a new method of language learning helped in building interculturality among Algerian students.

KEYWORDS: Inter-Culturality, Social Networks, Foreign Language Learning, Video Conferencing, ICT, Intercultural Communicative Competence.

RESUME: *L’ère de l’information ou ce que Warschauer (1999) appelle « la nouvelle révolution industrielle » en raison de l’émergence d’internet, a ouvert la voie à de nombreux domaines à prospérer, voire le domaine d’apprentissage. L’introduction d’outils de réseautage Internet dans les cours de langues a propagé dans le monde et le dernier est dit pour améliorer la compétence interculturelle parmi les étudiants disposés à acquérir une langue étrangère, vue cette forme d’interaction sociale leur permet de construire des relations solides*

et des communautés en ligne d'intérêts communs qui mène à une compréhension profonde à la fois des langues et des cultures simultanément.

En Algérie, en particulier à l'Université de Tlemcen, nous croyons qu'un tel apprentissage en ligne favorise la compétence interculturelle puisque les étudiants locaux interagissent avec des étudiants culturellement différents par le biais de plates-formes de réseaux sociaux afin de saisir la langue anglaise dans un environnement culturel, dans cet esprit, le présent travail de recherche vise à explorer si une telle nouvelle méthode d'apprentissage des langues a contribué à la construction de l'interculturel chez les étudiants Algériens.

MOTS-CLES: Inter-culturalité, Réseaux Sociaux, L'apprentissage des Langues Etrangères, La Vidéoconférence, Les TIC, La Compétence Communicative Interculturelle.

Introduction:

The last decade has witnessed a time of important development in the area of foreign language education due to the 'clash of civilizations' O'dowd (2007). The proliferation of the internet has triggered new perceptions to the way languages should be learned (Block and Cameron, 2002, Crystal 2001). Previous educational aims of foreign language teaching /learning also shifted from building merely a 'communicative competence' to enhancing 'intercultural communicative competence' Bryam (2008). Moreover, social changes of the 20th century; 'globalization' and 'internationalization' have attributed a new meaning to foreign language education, stressing the significance of both plurilingualism and pluricultural competence (Council of Europe, 2001: 168)

The incorporation of information communication tools (ICTs) in foreign language teaching class has been stimulating teachers' and learners' attention around the world, given the significance of network based language teaching(NBLT) in providing students with new spaces to interact with culturally distinct people. These forums provided them with a space where they can share their views and beliefs, create profiles and develop relationships online, leading to a deep understanding of the cultural traits of each other's Throne (2010).

Although changes in foreign language education aims in the third world are going in slow paths Bryam (2008), there is still an observable progress in this area, Algeria is not an exception where particularly at Tlemcen university, a collaborative program called 'global understanding' was launched in 2005 between the later and university of South Carolina where

the main objective was breaking the boundaries and bridging to the other cultures (Mouhadjer,2015) through engaging students into virtual interactions with foreign peers(global virtual community). Eventually, this research paper attempts to shed light upon the importance of social networking as a new tool in building intercultural communicative competence among Algerian students engaged in such a project.

1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

1.1 Theories and Concepts:

Culture is seen as a “highly complex, elusive and multilayered notion” Furstenberg (2010), Hofstede’s (1991, p,10) defines it as: “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another”. At the light of this definition, one may think of culture as the social practices, the shared norms, attitudes beliefs, languages and conventions that are community specific, or as Sapir defines it: “What a society does and thinks”.

Intercultural Communication involves people from different cultural backgrounds interacting together. With language and culture being intricately interlinked, they are seen as complementary aspects in foreign language education, given the fact that culture is the basis of any communication. Language itself has no value outside its cultural setting. Thus, given this interrelatedness, knowledge of both is compulsory in foreign language education and EFL in particular due to international role of the English language. In this vein, Georgieva (2010) argues that knowledge of language can be thoroughly comprehensible solely if the cultural context is well understood. Bryam (2008) who advocates this claim, also posits that knowledge of the linguistic apparatus (grammars, lexicon, syntax) of a language is never sufficient for students to engage in an oral communication, they necessitate instead a deeper knowledge of the target language’s culture in order to produce meaningful expressions relevant to the socio-cultural parameters of the setting. Based on these assumptions, the publication of the Standards (1999) which was a turning point in the teaching learning environment, signaled a new era moving from the linguistic framework (teaching the four skills) to what is called the 5c’s; (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities) as main language learning goals. Thus, for language

learners to heighten their interculturality; entails merging them in an interactive class where they have to use the language in its cultural and contextual terrain.

With regard to intercultural communicative competence many models have been developed, a major model stems from Bryam (1997) who stresses the salience of (ICC) in language education as he defines it as: “The ability to establish a community of meanings across cultural boundaries [...] this involves both cognitive and affective processes, they are fundamental to the contribution of foreign language teaching to learners’ education” (p,25). Learners in this sense through cross cultural communication, cultivate a significant awareness of themselves and the others what, Bryam calls ‘Tertiary socialization’. The latter can be achieved through “Juxtaposition and comparison of familiar experiences and concepts with those of other societies”. Consequently, leading them to develop a sense of ‘Critical Cultural Awareness’. By doing so, learners begin to perceive themselves as ‘citizens of the world’ ignoring the geographical boundaries and promoting a spirit of co-operation and appreciation towards other cultures. Education for intercultural citizenship according to Bryam (2008) results in psychological and behavioral alternation in learners, which involves change in their self-perception and understanding their relationships to other social groups, enabling them to recognize the particularity of the groups and their cultures. In the same vein, Bennette (1993) also puts it clear that for learners to be interculturally competent, a person’s world perception must shift from what he calls ‘ethnocentrism’ to ‘ethnorelativism’ which resides on an attitude of openness towards the others’ cultures, through tolerating differences and similarities. According to Mouhadjer (2012) the head of the project, cultivating a sense of ethnorelativism was one of the driving forces behind launching the GVC program, since traditional language teaching is deemed to be insufficient to achieve such objectives, social networking sites are then affording students with new language learning environments where they can interact cross culturally with students from dispersed locations. The GVC program was initiated to culminate the goals of education for citizenship that are: skills, knowledge and attitudes (ibid).

2. Network Based Language Education and Intercultural Exchange:

The proliferation of the internet and information communication technological tools, has undoubtedly impinged the way human beings communicate, socialise, and learn and has gone beyond what Castells (1996) calls 'Network society' (O'dowd 2000). At the light of this technological advance, many language educators have stressed the potential of networked technologies in building intercultural competence among learners so as to reinforce traditional language teaching methods which are often seen as limited and over focused on the transmission of information (Block, 2001; Greenfell, 2000). Moreover, social networking sites (SNSs) are said to afford language teachers a variety of ways to break the ice helping students to increase their motivation and reinvigorating the classroom climate (Mazer et al2007). Besides, "SNSs also appear to improve learners digital and multiliteracy skills, communicate in the target language, work collaboratively, and develop their linguistic and pragmatic proficiency" (Blattner and Fiori, 2011; Blattner and Lomicka, 2012).

Online intercultural exchange or internet mediated intercultural foreign language education (Belz and Throne 2006) refers to bringing together language learners from various cultural backgrounds and engaging them in a virtual interaction and collaborative project work through the use of online communication tools such as; emails and discussion forums. The aims behind such an initiative is to develop student's communicative competence in the language in question as well as to promote their intercultural sensitivity (O'dowd 2000). The high speed of the internet, in addition to the existence of various second generation networking services (Facebook, Twitter, etc..) enables learners from all over the world to socialize and to express their identities and create endless interconnected networks of social or professional encounters (ibid).

Online intercultural interaction can take the form of either 'Asynchronous' (not simultaneously) i.e. through the use of emails which enables them to compose messages whenever they want, or 'Synchronous' (real time) such as communicating through relay chat or video conferencing that permits the participants to interact concurrently with their foreign peers where they can share unlimited lengthy discussions, internet mediated communication

also offers students the possibility of having either one to one, or one to many communication (ibid).

3. The Global Virtual Community (GVC):

The global virtual community is a project which takes as its focal point of interest intercultural exchange among English second language learners. It was launched in 2005 as a collaborative work between Tlemcen University (Algeria), and University of South Carolina in USA. The main objective underlying such initiative was to break the geographical boundaries between countries supporting the theory of education for intercultural citizenship developed by (Bryam1997). It involves merging a group of 16 students from the English department into a virtual class with foreign peers from which eight students are said to do chat while the other eight are supposed to interact through video conferencing, these students are invited to discuss topics such: family, college and education, cultural traditions, meaning of life in addition to stereotypes and prejudices.

As far as the learning goals of this program are concerned, the head of the project Nouredine Mouhadje (2012) explains that this engaged learning takes as its main objective , attitudes, knowledge and skills , attitudes imply that such a program aims at raising learners' interest in the other cultures as they question their own and the others' values and social practices Knowledge resides in enhancing learners digital literacy and knowledge of the social institutions and processes of both countries, while skills involve identifying ethnocentric perspectives and their origins, in addition to locating misunderstandings during interactions and explaining them in terms of the present cultural systems(ibid).

4. Methodology

4.1 Setting:

The survey took place in the GVC classroom at Tlemcen University with 16 English second year students specialized in Literature and Civilization and who were engaged in the virtual classroom. They were aged between 20 and 24, 5 of whom were males while 11 were female students.

4.2 Data Collection:

The present study employed both a qualitative and a quantitative approach. Data were collected through a semi-structures questionnaire and an

interview. The questionnaire comprised 10 statements, it was completed by the participants through a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Besides, an interview was conducted with students individually in order to measure the students' attitudes towards the project.

4.3 Results:

This sections aims at capturing the students answers to the questionnaire questions. Whereas, it is worth stating that not all the questions are presented. Hence the questions discussed below represent the most important ones.

Statement 1: Using the internet in language education helped in building mutual understanding between culturally distinct people

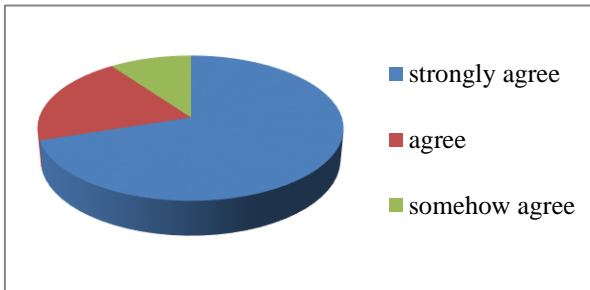


Figure 1.

As the graph indicates students are aware of the potential of networking sites in building intercultural competence among L2 learners since all of them have experienced the GVC program and appreciated the use of this novel tool in the language classroom, they all claimed that it enhanced their knowledge of other cultures especially for students who aren't able to travel abroad to discover the other countries and their cultures.

Statement 2: I feel I am more aware of my own cultural traits and the other's than I used to be before engaging in GVC sessions

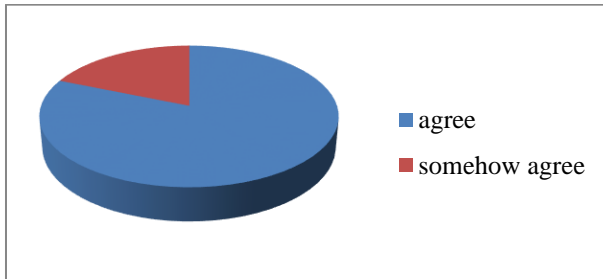


Figure 2.

As shown in the results, the self-awareness that most scholars have spoken about is a critical aspect of online intercultural exchange, given the fact that students, through virtual interaction, develop not only a knowledge of the other cultures but they tend to discover more about their own and build a distinct identity based on the comparisons with the other cultures. Students mentioned that they became acquainted with the American culture being a melting pot of different cultures and traditions through their interaction with students from South Carolina that were from different backgrounds (Asians, South Africans, Spanish).

Statement 3: I am more open –minded towards people from different cultures thanks to GVC sessions

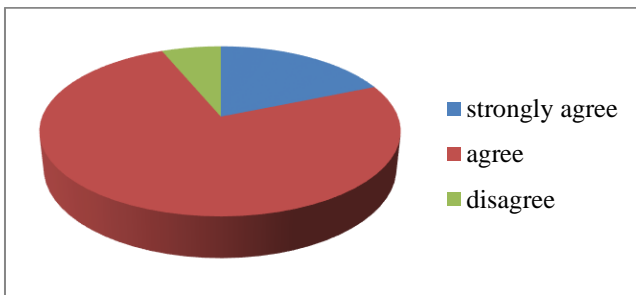


Figure 3.

Almost all students claimed that their virtual experience made them more open minded and tolerant towards cultures they ignored or didn't use to

accept, moving from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Accepting the other cultures just the way they accept theirs, with their similarities and differences. Thus, acting as citizens of the world not just their country.

Statement 4: I've learned more about the beliefs and values of the culturally distinct people I interact with virtually

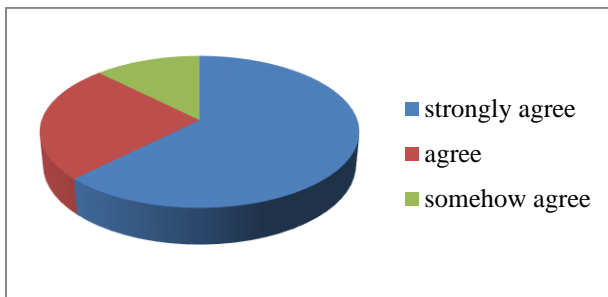


Figure 4.

Reactions to this statement reflected the usefulness of virtual interactions in exchanging knowledge of the beliefs among peers belonging to different cultural backgrounds. Regarding beliefs for instance they have mentioned that Americans are punctual, so time seems to be more important than in their culture as Algerians. Another student also mentioned the parents - children relationships after the age of 18 which differs from ours.

Statement 5: Social networking as a new tool helps students to be interculturally competent more than traditional methods:

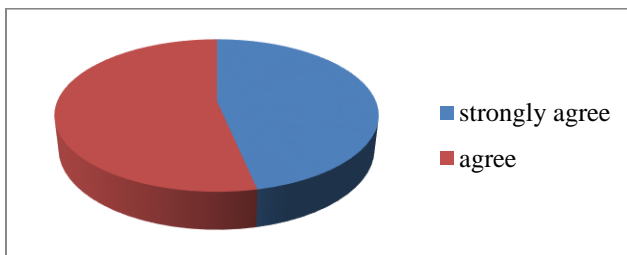


Figure 5.

Reactions to this statement proved that social networking paved the way to interculture to take place more than traditional method. The majority

of students expressed appreciation towards the use of these tools. They claimed that being up to date with technological advance allows them to bridge the gap to the outside world civilizations' and cultures through their interaction with native speakers, contrary to the traditional method that used to emphasize solely on the exchange of data.

4.4 Discussion:

Based on the interview and the questionnaire findings, it can be inferred that social networking sites constituted a springboard to intercultural competence and opened a new avenue in language education environment. Almost all students displayed favorable reactions towards their experience in the global virtual community, claiming that such collaborative tasks helped them increase their cross-cultural awareness. The learning goals set for the program are said to be thoroughly achieved as far as knowledge, attitudes and skills are concerned. Students developed strong closeness with their foreign peers given the fact that they are interacting with them even informally through other social networking sites, some even got married thanks to these sessions. Thus, network based language learning gave them the opportunity to promote not only their linguistic skills but only their pragmatic competencies, and has turned them into citizens of the world. It also cultivated a sense of open-mindedness towards totally distinct cultures departing from 'egocentricity and ethnocentrism' (Byram, 2008).

Conclusion:

Given the fact that the interplay of globalization and internalization has attributed a new meaning to language education, the present paper attempted to spotlight the salience of social networking as a new language learning environment in promoting intercultural competence in among EFL students. The current survey confirmed this claim. The introduction of these tools permitted learners to discover many cultural traits of the others and helped them construct their distinct identities. Finally, as Liam Neeson, the actor and spokesman puts it clear: "If we are committed to the dream of world peace we must first educate our children and teach them understanding and compassion for other people and cultures" (Mouhadjer, 2012).

References

- Byram Michael (2008), “From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship”, *Multilingual Matters*.
- Bennett, J. M. (1993). *Toward Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity*. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the Intercultural Experience* (pp. 21-71). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Mouhadjer, Noredine (2012), “Education for Intercultural Citizenship, Breaking Boundaries and Building Bridges with other Cultures”, [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/140089817>.
- Robert O’Dowd(2007), “Online Intercultural Exchange”: An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers, *Multilingual Matters ITD*.
- Richard Kern and Mark Warschauer (2000), ‘Network – based language teaching: concepts and practices, Cambridge University Press.
- Vurdien, R. (2014). *Social networking: Developing intercultural competence and fostering autonomous learning*. In S. Jager, L. Bradley, E. J. Meima, & S. Thouësny (Eds), *CALL Design: Principles and Practice*.