

ICT in the Algerian EFL Classrooms: An Innovative Means to Enhance Learners' Autonomy

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of “learner autonomy” enhanced by Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the Algerian English Foreign Language (EFL) context as seen through the lens of the existing Second Language Learning (SLL) theories where learner autonomy is perceived as a facilitating factor of the learning process especially if this latter is enhanced by the use of multimedia resources. The study reported in this paper introduces a novice project for the teaching of English applying innovative means and pedagogies that enhance learners' autonomy which contributes positively in their SL uptake. The present study shows how ICT pedagogies could create positive opportunities for learners to go beyond their classroom environment and encourage them to engage in meaningful interactional spaces where they are pushed to invest their identities and to “speak as themselves”. The dimensions of learners' autonomy have been addressed through applying classroom observation and students questionnaires. The preliminary results of students' attitudes towards the use of ICT tools in our EFL context and the feasibility of the implemented pedagogy are gathered to show the positive impact of the devised instruments. The findings display that ICT tools not only help learners express themselves in the target language through motivating them to participate in the different EFL classroom tasks, but also it helped them to expose their personal identities whereby their EFL fluency has been promoted. The data confirms that teachers are meant to create positive and effective environments for communication through encouraging learners' autonomy by implementing ICT means.

1. Introduction

The central theme of this paper is learner autonomy enhanced by Information Communication Technology (ICT) pedagogies in the Algerian English Foreign Language (EFL) context. The notion of learner autonomy, here, is perceived from the socio-cultural perspective where the idea is introduced in our EFL context for the purpose of enhancing EFL learners' uptake and learning processes. The approach devised for supporting learner autonomy is meant to encourage the

principles of self-determination, self-reliance and self-rule within the EFL learning environment, a setting enhanced by ICT pedagogies and innovative resources. The current research project has been undertaken to explore the viability of ICT tools in our EFL context for the teaching of English and how far this technique implements autonomous learning successfully. The study reported in this paper is a one year classroom research based study looking at the students' attitudes towards the proposed pedagogy for the teaching of English speaking skills. The findings of this research provide valuable insights on learner autonomy within a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) setting. It addresses, also, the issue of the relationship between learner and context with regard to self-determination, self-reliance and self-rule. There is a plethora of research carried out in the field of learner autonomy within Western second language education contexts that tackles the efficiency of autonomous learning approaches, but few studies have been carried out in the Algerian EFL context especially if this latter is associated with ICT tools. Drawing on classroom observation and questionnaires data sources, this study illustrates how ICT enhanced pedagogies in our EFL contexts could be a determining factor for fostering EFL learnability and encouraging learners' autonomy as interpreted from the socio-cultural perspective. Thus, the present research project seeks to investigate the current queries:

- Is ICT a viable tool for the teaching of English?
- If, Yes? What is the fate of using Technology in our EFL setting?
- In what way and to what extent does the interaction enhanced by ICT pedagogies foster learners' autonomy?
- Can the Algerian University meet the 21st century demands?

These inquiries are meant to unveil the reality behind using ICT tools in our EFL classrooms and to see how far the implemented pedagogies could positively impact our teaching and learning enterprise.

2. Objectives

One prominent factor that contributes to the development of EFL learning is “Autonomy” enhanced by ICT tools, and when we say Autonomy, we refer mainly to learner’s responsibility of one’s learning. Thus, knowing how learner autonomy influences the development of EFL learning has become an absolute necessity for both teachers and researchers in the Algerian context. Interest in this study has increased because it would provide us with empirical evidence for what has been stated as theory. It would be an attempt to seek the best approach to promote foreign language teaching procedures, or rather provide useful techniques for teaching in the EFL classroom. Thus, the current study has four overarching objectives:

- Shed light on the reality of ICT pedagogies in the Algerian University.
- Scrutinize the effectiveness of different multimedia resources in enhancing learners’ autonomy in our EFL context.
- Introduce a novice, but promising project for the teaching of English via innovative means.

This study is supposed to provide a rationale for the existence and development of programs and curricular. This study is deemed beneficial because it investigates the different processes that promote EFL learning. It studies relationships between teaching and learning within a CMC context. It identifies which particular instructional means contributes to enhancing EFL learning processes.

3. Literature Review

At the outbreak of the 21st century and within the language learning context, the use of ICT tools has been regarded monumental providing ample opportunities for learners to foster their skills and learning abilities. In fact, no one can deny the important role that ICT does play in our daily lives. The 21st century has been characterized by Underwood [1] mainly to be the digital age for the widespread use of innovative means in all domains of our daily life. As [1] has claimed: “the ICT revolution is a deep cultural revolution changing all modes and patterns of our lives and hence bound to lead to dramatic changes in education” (p.4). In reverence with this, [1] contended that digital technologies have brought positive effects on formal education through:

- “Increasing learner effectiveness or performance gains,
- Increasing learner efficiency,
- Greater learner engagement or satisfaction,
- More positive student attitudes to learning”(p.5)

The present study advocates the assumption that not only ICT implementation could contribute in meeting the different intellectual demands, but also it plays a pivotal role in fostering EFL proficiency as it has been stressed by Bejar [2] “[...] technology could help to address challenges such as the development of literacy, especially reading proficiency and the acquisition of communicative competence in English.” (p.1). As well as “Technology could have a positive effect by creating more frequent opportunities for students to learn” (p.2) [2]. In addition, Technology has indeed changed the nature of learning. With regard to this, it has been argued by the National Education Technology Plan 2010 [3] that “there are connected types of human learning: factual knowledge, procedural knowledge, and motivational engagement [...] supported by three different brain systems [...] Social sciences reveal that human expertise integrates all three types of learning. Technology has increased our ability to both study and enhance all three types of learning.”(p.15). It has been widely argued that ICT usage allows weak learners to reveal their capacity and creative mind. Through providing excellent authentic materials, technology offers language learners a chance to use daily conversations and rich vocabulary. In brief, it can positively change both teachers’ and learners’ endeavors in the EFL context. These claims have been supported by many studies carried out in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) such as: Arcairo [4] who stated that using authentic video in EFL classrooms can be interesting and attractive for communicative dialogues. In addition, Kang [5] emphasized the positive effects of ICT in EFL classrooms by allowing the students to observe the real life situation and meaningful communication. Chappelle and Curtis [6] pointed out that using authentic films in the classrooms motivates the learners because many contextual clues of films, and they make learners use both of their hemispheres which are very important for language learning. Insights on learner autonomy driven from the socio-cultural theory are underpinned by an imparted vision of a language learning theory that is social and pragmatic and which stresses the idea of using language as a “tool for communication” Gremmo and Riley [7], cited in Benson and Toogood [8]. Within this respect, language is seen as a source of mediation in the

social environment at the same time it is a medium for expressing one's demands and motives. In the literature, the link between autonomy and ICT is widely supported. The question here is how autonomous learning is developed through the implementation of multimedia resources. In our context, the efficiency of ICT tools is measured with regard to enhancing learners' EFL communicative abilities. As concerns this, Little [9], quoted by [8] argued that: "in order to achieve communicative proficiency learners in formal contexts must be required not simply to practice prefabricated dialogues and role plays, but to use the target language to articulate their own meanings in the fulfillment of communicative purposes that arise naturally in the course of the learning dialogue. The foreign language must be the medium as well as the content of learning" (p. 15). From this, it could be understood that communicative proficiency is not only tied to the use of the target language's apron strings, but also it is under the thumb of learners' ability to put into practice their meaningful autonomy within the realm of language use [9]. For [9], autonomy is fostered in the EFL context through providing authentic means and "authentic interaction and collaboration on tasks in the target language." (p. 16), cited in [8]. When we say authentic means, this would straight away draw our attention towards the use of multimedia resources or innovative means. In relation to this, Anderson and Speck [10] mentioned that using technology in the classroom not only motivates the learners, but engages them in speaking, reading, listening and writing easier. Belz [11] thinks that technology brings meaningful and communicative materials into the classroom such as Tele-collaboration and interaction. Brown [12] explained that internet and distance education increase the quality of language learning and provide available education. He indicated, also, how Web Learning offers well-selected activities and interactive learning. Hamer [13] pointed out that students can become active and dynamic learners by means of online education and also mentioned the importance of Computer-based technological classrooms because they provide learners with unreachable and fascinating activities which attract and motivate them. Ilter [14] stressed the importance of Technology as a means to motivate learners in the EFL classroom. Both female and male students believe that technology in the EFL classrooms motivates them. From this surfeit of studies, it is evident that CMC enhanced environments intertwined with the learner autonomy philosophy could positively impact the outcomes of EFL learning processes. To provide an in-depth exploration of this idea, the current project has been carried out in the Algerian EFL setting by devising a CMC based program that aims at fostering not only learners' communicative proficiency, but also help

them to decide for their own learning. But, before we engage into a detailed account of how this program has been designed and what is the concrete evidence for its efficiency, it is thought at this level to provide a conventional definition of what is meant by "learner autonomy" to guide our next discussion.

3.1. Conventional Definitions

The idea of "Autonomy" has been perceived from various lenses, but within this context, I will quote Benson's [15], cited in Lamb and Reinders [16] conceptualization from both teachers' and learners' perspectives where he argued that "Autonomy is primarily concerned with institutional and classroom learning arrangements within established curricula [...] Autonomy tends to imply the learner taking control of arrangements whose underlying legitimacy is unquestioned". Within this regard, Autonomy is meant to be the capacity of persons to lead an autonomous life or "to some condition of situational freedom that facilitates the exercise of this capacity" (p.21) [16]. It is also "a recognition of the rights of the learners within educational systems" [9]. In language learning, Autonomy is defined by Holec [17] as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning [...] this ability is not inborn but must be acquired either by natural means or as most often happens by formal learning, i.e., in a systematic, deliberate way". [17] added that "to take charge of one's own learning is to have [...] the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning." (p.3). In fact, trying to set a conventional insight into the conceptualization of Learner Autonomy has been thought to be somehow controversial by many, but Little [18] summarized it into the following: "Autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning program, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness." (p.1). Thus, for learner autonomy processing one requires "insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others." (p.1) [18]. In accordance with this, [9] defined autonomy as: "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action. The various freedoms that autonomy implies are always conditional and constrained never absolute." (p.7). In a similar vein, Dicknson [19], cited in [16] asserted that "Autonomy is an experiment in how learning can be freed from the bounds of any institution, and in how the individual can reclaim control and responsibility for his or her own education, while investigating the opportunities to learn from a variety of authentic sources." (p.22). These discrepancies in the conceptualization of learner autonomy are an

illustration of the ongoing attempts to contextualize learner autonomy within the socio-cultural framework and a way to construct an effective methodology from many perspectives in order to employ in our teaching practices.

4. ICT in the Algerian EFL Context: Facts and Realities

The use of ICT tools in our EFL setting has become a reality that has imposed itself in force within the last six years. After 2008, the English Department at Batna University (Algeria) has launched a huge and promising project for the teaching of English with one purpose to enhance quality in terms of the strategies and approaches adopted for the teaching of foreign languages. Those promising attitudes towards raising the scale of quality in the teaching of EFL have been characterized by embracing innovative means and pedagogies that rely mainly on fostering learner-centeredness and learner autonomy especially after the ongoing institutional reforms of the Higher Education system after 2004 portrayed in the Licence Master Doctorate (LMD) Reforms. Among those reforms the classroom is not anymore teacher led, but rather student led where EFL learners are pushed to take responsibility of their own learning. Within this respect, teachers are seen as mentors or facilitators of learning. To put into practice those principles, the English Department at Batna University has equipped three innovative laboratories with highly sophisticated ICT means to meet those ends. As a participant in this promising program, I have devised an interactive approach for the teaching of English mainly meant to foster learners' EFL speaking proficiency. This program has been implemented for one year on 1st Year Undergraduate LMD students, and the results we have obtained were really encouraging. Other colleagues inspired by this zealous project organized successful videoconferences and shared their experiences of using podcasts in their teaching and other innovative means. This is just to say that ICT in our EFL settings has become an undeniable reality that has established itself as a necessary tool for the dissemination of knowledge and EFL skills.

5. The CPP Model

For thirteen years, it has been observed that our EFL students did not have the required academic standard of using the target language in spite of many years of exposure to this latter. In 2008, approximately 60% of our EFL students scored in grammar, listening and speaking below average before being exposed to the CPP Program. In 2012, 50% of the 1st Year LMD students scored badly in

their first exams in grammar, listening and speaking before the implementation of the devised pedagogy. This was among one of the reasons why I have decided to carry out the current investigation searching for new models and approaches to solve the inefficiency of our EFL students. Among the assumptions held at the beginning were that our students were demotivated to learn English because of the traditional methods applied. Therefore, I opted for applying the so-called CPP Model which stands for Content, Process and Product program. The idea for this project came out thanks to my interest in applying ICT tools as pedagogy for the teaching of English, and also from my personal experience as an EFL learner. In fact, I got the first inspiration for the CPP Project from the DCP Instructional Model of Apasara Chinwonno and Sumanee Pinweha [20]. The CPP Model is a communicative interactive program that uses different Software for the teaching of English. The aims of this project are to enable EFL learners to learn English anywhere, at any time, and with their own pace even without the presence of the teacher, or, as it has been said before to help students take control of their own learning. The CPP Program is a learner-centered approach based on the ideology that learners should be given more ample opportunities to guide their learning, and also the instructor is not anymore considered as a giver of knowledge, but rather as someone who facilitates learning. Before, in traditional models of teaching, teachers looked at what has been done in the teaching process, and a lot has been neglected in terms of the learners' decisions about learning. One of the core principles of the CPP Model is that the learner is an active participant in shaping the educational agenda. In Algeria and before the LMD Reforms, students' voice was unheard. Thus, it has been felt due time for the collaboration of the real actors in the learning process. The guidelines of the CPP Model are summarized in the following chart:

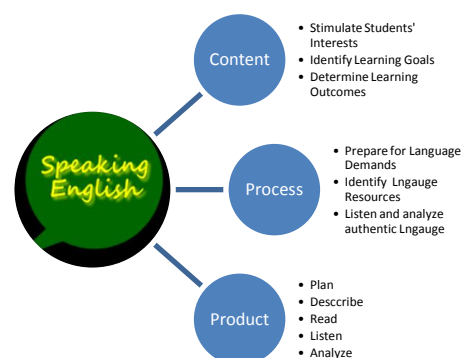


Figure 1. The CPP Model

The CPP Model is based on three important phases: In the Content part, tasks are selected from innovative Software such as “Learn English in 90 days”, “English for All”, and “Tell Me More” Software to meet the students’ needs. The content of the tasks is selected according to students’ interests, the learning goals and outcomes set by both the students and the teacher. In this phase, EFL students are exposed to authentic means, authentic language and real life situations. In the second phase: The Process part, here, the students are meant to put into practice what they have learned or rather what they have been exposed to. In this phase EFL students are prepared for different language demands where they would be able to identify language resources and they are trained to analyze authentic language. This would lead them to the final Product phase. Here, EFL learners should be able to show their abilities to deal with different tasks such as planning, describing, reading, listening and analyzing through English. The CPP Model has been recognized as an interactive framework that intertwines between ICT and Autonomy. The students are given training and guidance in the classroom and then they are allowed to use the software on their own where access to the tasks and the software is made possible for all the students.

6. Research Methodology Design

This research project is a classroom research based study where both quantitative and qualitative data have been gathered to inform us about the feasibility of the implemented methodology. I have applied questionnaires and classroom observation to document for the viability of the CPP Model. Among a population of 700 1st Year LMD students, a group of 75 learners has been chosen as a sample for the study. These learners were my own students, and I have applied the CPP program on them for the course of Oral Expression all along one year normal curriculum activities. Throughout this research project, there was an attempt to detect which tasks encourage classroom interaction, autonomous learning as well as motivation to learn and, above all, help learners produce the target language correctly and appropriately. In this paper, I will report the questionnaire results as an evidence of the viability of the CPP Model in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language.

7. Questionnaire Results

The sample has been given 10 questions all of which are meant to gather data with regard to the set model. Some of the questionnaire items have been inspired by the work held by [14]. The questions are categorized as follows:

1. Learners’ perceptions about EFL teaching in general.
2. Learners’ perceptions about the teaching of the oral course.
3. Learners’ perceptions about ICT.
4. Learners’ attitudes towards ICT for the teaching of Oral Expression.

The results obtained through the administered questionnaire are summed up in the following diagram:

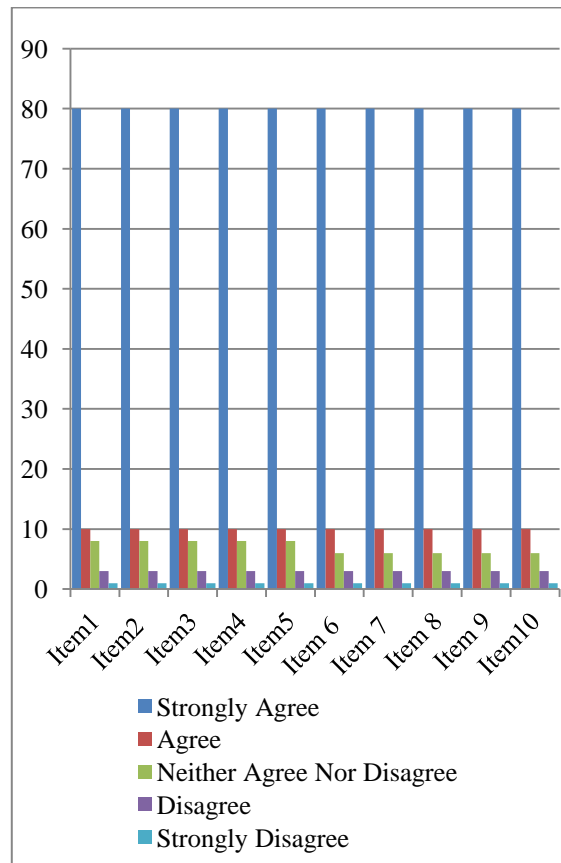


Figure 2. Learners’ Attitudes Towards The CPP Model

This diagram will not make any sense unless we look at the items displayed in the following table (see Table 1) for the questions asked.

Table 1. Questionnaire Items

Item	Questions
1	Using multimedia computers in learning English fosters my speaking ability
2	I learn better through exposure to native speakers via multimedia

	resources
3	The teacher should choose innovative means to teach English conversation skills
4	Students should have conversation with teachers
5	Students should mainly have conversation with other students
6	Knowing about western culture is necessary for learning English conversation
7	Teachers should use technology in the language classroom for every lesson
8	Films, Videos , CDs and e-learning can be helpful to develop my English skills
9	Technological devices are necessary for language teaching
10	Computer based lessons are more enjoyable and effective than traditional lessons

8. Discussion

From the diagram and in reference to Table 1, it is clearly shown that 80% of the 1st Year LMD students strongly agreed that they learn better when they are exposed to native speakers. Also, 80% of the students strongly agreed that using computers in learning English fosters their speaking ability. In fact, the same percentage strongly supported the application of innovative means in the teaching of English conversation skills such as films, videos, CDs and e-learning to develop their communicative skills all of which are provided by the CPP Program. They also strongly agreed that computer-based lessons are more enjoyable and effective than traditional lessons. 80% of the learners strongly favored the usage of computers and multimedia resources for every lesson and they consider the use of technological devices necessary for language learning. Not only this, the questionnaire displays that knowing about Western culture is necessary for learning English conversation with a proportion of 80% positive responses. In fact, all these answers are concrete evidence of the fact that the implementation of the CPP Model has been really effective. 80% of

the students wanted a classroom environment enhanced by multimedia resources where they would be able to listen and to expose themselves to authentic language and native speakers. This latter would secure opportunities that fit their needs and language demands. The use of the CPP Model could enable our EFL learners to monitor their learning on their own by increasing their motivation to learn. It facilitates access to tasks and language tools anywhere, and at any time where they feel up to. For 80% of the students, the CPP Model is more enjoyable and effective than traditional lessons because it enabled them to expose themselves to authentic language and promoted their speaking ability. To back up this evidence, in 2013, the scores of the learners exposed to this project peaked in grammar, listening, and speaking after one year delivery. The CPP Model ensured for EFL students the context to expose them to the western culture because this is paramount for developing their oral skills. In brief, the CPP Program provides EFL learners with:

1. An outgoing convivial learning environment.
2. Opportunities for self- monitoring.
3. Autonomous learning contexts.
4. Extra-practice and feedback.
5. Integrated skills.
6. An easy extensible delivery of knowledge with respect to learners' convenience in any place.

With reverence to the set queries, one can say that ICT has been proved to be an effective tool for the teaching of English because this latter is an open door or a medium for bringing native speakers into classroom settings. ICT tools provide real life situations and authentic dialogues for students. Also, ICT pedagogies yield good opportunities for EFL learners to practice their autonomy. In accordance with this, the CPP Model teacher takes into account learners' needs, interests and goals in the design and the selection of tasks. Once agreed upon the lessons' plan, the students would be able to access the content and to practice what has been learnt and even to assess their learning outcomes on their own with the help of the guiding Software. The teacher is just a facilitator or rather a mentor for the learning process. Regarding the 21st century challenges and demands, the Algerian University looks promising for what is required from both teachers and even the decision makers. The Algerian University has proved to have the required skills and pedagogical materials to ensure an outstanding quality of EFL teaching. The application of the CPP Program is just a very

concrete evidence of the future aspirations of a generation opened toward the forthcoming century.

9. Conclusion

The quantitative results obtained from the current study are an illustration of the effectiveness of the innovative models applied to enhance learners' autonomy. This study shows that autonomy is enhanced through ICT pedagogies and also through the help of the devised decisions taken by teachers. The CPP program offered lavish and encouraging opportunities for learners to practice their autonomy, their uptake and to be exposed to the target language through creating real life scenarios. Through the findings, we may confirm that ICT means have made it possible for our 1st Year LMD students to get in touch with the English native world. Of course, we cannot assume that the newly devised pedagogy is going to set aside teachers, but rather it considers them as collaborative agents with both learners and ICT tools in shaping the teaching/learning enterprise. As teachers we are not supposed to neglect the usage of innovative materials especially if we have the feeling that our learners are more superior than we are in terms of ICT usage. On the contrary, we should encourage the integration of ICT tools for the benefits of our learners to meet their needs and to foster their learning outcomes. If the LMD Reforms are set to be more learner-oriented; therefore, the CPP Framework is deemed beneficial for the application of the reform ideals, and this is just the beginning of an ongoing process.

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