

Integrating ICT for the Global Understanding Program

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Abstract

Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon (as cited in Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) noted that there is a change in the definition of “knowing” which is shifting to the ability to find and understand information. In this sense, technology allows us to retrieve information and treat it in a different way which is the reason why teaching with the integration of new tools has been of special interest to many researchers. Moreover, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) receive particular attention when adapted to education. In this article, we will shed light on the way the Global Understanding (GU) course has been adapted by Abou Bekr Belkaid University of Tlemcen, and describe the tools that have been added. We will also provide a student review of the pros and cons of ICT in the classroom.

Introduction

The Global Understanding course is a cross-cultural program launched by East Carolina University (ECU) for promoting peace and understanding in different parts of the world. Since 2005, Abou Bekr Belkaid University of Tlemcen (UABT) has participated as a partner country. Each semester, many students subscribe mainly to enhance their learning of the English language, but also to get to know other peoples throughout the world.

In order to respond to the growing number of students interested in joining the Global Understanding course, students must pass a computerized test adapted from English as a Second Language (ESL) Textbooks (Intermediate level), followed by an interview. The test encompasses twenty-one multiple choice questions associated with a small text for reading comprehension, as well as other questions related to vocabulary and grammar (see Figure 1).

Once they score 50% or above, the students are directed to the teacher in charge of the GU courses for an interview. During this meeting, the teacher analyses the oral skill of the students as well as other traits, like personality (introvert, extrovert), leadership, open-mindedness and the ability to accept contact with a person from another culture (another race, gender, religion; ...etc). The selection is balanced as an equal number of boys and girls are preferred with a total of fourteen students.

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Connecté sous le nom « maliha meziane » (Déconnexion)

Temps restant 0:13:39

Numérique UABT

Prévisualiser Test of English

Recommencer

1 Points: 1 Applying for a job is something _____.

Veillez choisir une réponse.

a. that many people enjoy greatly

b. that doesn't cause anxiety

c. that requires very little effort

d. that few people really like

2 Points: 1 Your offer has been **turned down** _____.

Veillez choisir une réponse.

a. accepted

b. rejected

c. postponed

d. changed

Figure 1: Computerized test of English intermediate level in UABT elearn platform.

Before the courses start, the students are required to attend a local meeting where they have enough time to introduce themselves and become familiarized with the videoconferencing system. The majority have never had class in a virtual environment, so they are generally nervous when initially hearing their voices or seeing their faces on the camera. Since the local students don't know each other, a camera is given to them in order to take group photos. This has a helpful effect on the students' behavior, as they respond positively while they get acquainted, exchange, share and comment on the photos in the secure environment of the elearn platform.

Next, the UABT technical team gives the selected students a login and a password to access UABT's elearn platform (<http://elearn.univ-tlemcen.dz>). This platform is a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (also called a Learning Management System), a powerful addition to any distance learning classroom. In the VLE, the teacher integrates some web 2.0 tools like chat, forum, blog, wiki, e-portfolio, podcast, a space to upload files, etc. which increase literacy skills. Like a social network, it enables the students to be in contact with each other as well as the teacher who responds to their questions. O'Reilly (2005) described Web 2.0 as an essential shift in the Internet tools available and the way these tools are being used. He claims that web 2.0 tools are more collaborative and have a shorter learning curve than original Internet tools, essentially lowering the threshold for participation.

The Learning Process

Fitzgerald (2004) believes that ICT in the classroom offers opportunities for new types of learning and cognitive approaches (see also Dede, 2009). Clearly, using distance learning opens many pedagogical possibilities for students. One of the aims of The Distance Learning Centre (Centre de Télé-Enseignement, <http://cte.univ-tlemcen.dz/>), where UABT students attend the virtual links, is to use technology to improve the quality of learning and contribute towards increasing effectiveness and

efficiency of the educational process. We notice that technology increases the learners' autonomy as well as motivation, being a "brand new" environment to them.

Nikolov and Nikolova (2008) note that technology is "rewiring" the students' brains. Further, Prensky (2001a,b) describes young learners who have grown up with technology as "digital natives" who are keen on collaborative learning and all that maintains digital connections with others. This is as compared to the "digital immigrants" who did not grow up with technology and, even if adopted, will always have the "accent" of an immigrant.

Prior to each link, the teacher launches a forum on the UABT elearn platform, where the students discuss their own culture and identify the most important points. This enables them to be aware of their own culture, and also get ready to debate the questions with their partners from other countries.

Subsequently, the GU 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 elearn 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. Consequently, we introduce a podcast activity as a tool to improve their English.

Making a Cross-Cultural Podcast

The use of podcasts has been extended to a considerable number of fields, such as, tourism, entertainment, advertising, library research and education (Lakhal, Khechine, & Pascot, 2007). While podcast content can include audio, video and image materials (Rossell-Aguilar, 2007), it may sometimes be used only with audio material and other times with video and media content as sometimes labeled "videocast".

When applied to education, psycholinguists have found that unlike reading and writing, listening is instinctual (Clark & Walsh, 2004). Brief podcasts can be useful for preparing students for class by addressing their preconceptions about the material (Chan & Lee, 2005). Chan, Lee, and McLoughlin (2006) have suggested best practice recommendations for podcasts: consider an initial purpose; make a short lively podcast composed of many voices rather than one monologue; and originality. While according to Peter Rawsthorne (2009) "...computers and computing offer profound opportunities to learn new things, old things in new ways and construct knowledge in ways that would be inaccessible without access to technology."

Throughout the GU courses, different topics are discussed like college life, family, traditions, meaning of life, stereotypes and prejudices. At the end, the students are required to submit a cross-cultural report about what they learned from the different countries they 'met' through the videoconference links. The aim of this activity is to engage all the students in an organized work group where they share and exchange ideas, be involved during the links, and have fun, because we believe that edutainment (education with entertainment) is very motivating. Therefore, submitting their report as a podcast appeared to be a little demanding but very appropriate, as

Stager (2005) suggests that knowledge is better constructed if shared by participants in a social context.

To ensure the success of this activity, the teacher introduces the basic ways of making podcasts in the UABT elearn platform by uploading different slide shows, videos and tutorials. The first step is to write an outline, then each student should record his part and then include representative photos. The teacher advises using Audacity; an open source tool to record speech, and windows movie maker; a built-in software in computers using Microsoft Windows to edit photos and make short movies. Upon request, the UABT tech team is also helpful for guiding students.

Students prepared a lot of questions that they asked during the links or by emailing their international friends, and then collected pictures from the internet. After that, they arranged the photos according to the script they wrote following a logical chronology where each student recorded his or her speech.

A Review of ICT in the GU Course

The final podcast submitted in the UABT elearn platform was well made technically with an instructive content. All students participated in this activity, and the content met the topic needs (comparing cultures). All of the students agreed that it was: "fun, creative, artistic, original, and personal."

Unexpectedly, the podcast also included some recorded voices of their international friends and the students used other professional tools than the ones suggested by the teacher (like Photoshop). They also added soft music in the background and the movie had a lot of artistic effects. This demonstrates their engagement and effort in completing this task.

Once the Global Understanding course was over, the teacher asked the students individually about their feelings towards this course and the challenges of using ICT in the classroom. Note that some students gave general comments while others went into details. Hence, the comments listed below have been grouped and adapted and do not constitute a complete record of all their statements.

- individual pace of studying
- almost direct feedback
- motivation and high stimulation for studies
- modern way of teaching
- education is linked to entertainment
- excitement to know about another culture
- as the role of the teacher is transparent during the course, learners' autonomy increases.
- opportunity to practice the language in-situ with native speakers.
- more opportunities for discussion (with the different tools, videoconferencing, , chat, forum, blog, social network...etc)
- A community of learners for innovation and teamwork
- enjoying the podcast activity
- some declared to continue making podcasts for other purposes.

On the other hand, some disadvantages are unavoidable, like:

- Technical issues which hinder the natural-like way of talking
- Lack of personal contact despite the face-to-face interaction.
- Time consuming and efforts demanding (especially for the podcast).
- Mixed feelings of anxiety and the curiosity towards the otherness.
- Topics are limited and repeated with every session.

Conclusion

The number of UABT students interested in participating to the Global Understanding Course is ever increasing. This program constitutes a “demystified window on the world.” It enables UABT students not only to know about other cultures, but also to enhance their knowledge of the English language in natural-like situations.

The use of ICT tools in education stands as a “bridge” since most of the students are already accustomed to Internet tools. When applied in the classroom, they no longer view their learning process as formal and authoritative, but rather view it as following an “edutainment” philosophy. Thus, they make friends and keep in contact with them even when the GU courses are over, whatever the time and geographic location they are in. Yet, it also proves that when the course is over, students continue to learn even without a teacher or any course requirements. They also become motivated to communicate in English with friends, and they are engaging in meaningful exchanges of information outside of the classroom.

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