
A Comparative Study of Conventional Learning and E-Learning with Reference to Arab Learners' FL & Translation Skills

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Abstract

This article sets out to highlight some the main similarities/differences between e-learning and conventional learning in terms of their nature, focus, setting, teacher/learner relationship and role, learner strategies and learning outcomes. It is hypothesized that the two modes of learning must display some similarities and differences in terms of those categories, and that their differences, which may outweigh their similarities, must have some bearing on developing Arab learners' FL and translation skills and strategies. To this effect, a brief overview of some of the major differences between the two modes of learning is first introduced, and then their implications for enhancing FL and translation skills are attempted. It is concluded that that e-learning and conventional learning can perform a complementary function which would, if exploited effectively, contribute to developing learners' learning strategies in general and their FL and translation skills and strategies in particular.

1. Introduction

Advances in science and technology have led to a lot of dramatic changes in a variety of fields. This is particularly true of education. Conventional education is no longer the only source for acquiring knowledge and information. Nor is it the only method of qualifying for a career. E-learning, a relatively recent outcome of the application of hi-tech to academic and vocational education, has become a prominent competitor in this field. This mode of learning is growing fast as a method of getting education and training (Kistan 2001). It has attracted over one million e-learners worldwide. This recent development has considerable implications for the quality of teaching and learning. It has also drawn attention to evaluate conventional and online teaching and learning methods.

Upsurge in this new mode of learning has brought about marked changes in the teaching/learning process and methodology, course design, quality of learner outcomes, among others. It has also brought about rethinking the role of

educational institutions. In his article "The changing landscape: e-learning in schools", Gerry White (2003) argues that

Schools are changing rapidly and expectations are rising. Students are being educated for a world that demands continuous learning, the creation of knowledge and adaptation of new circumstances. The community expects students to be technology competent.

Compared to conventional education, e-learning is visualized as having

"enormous potential for making learning faster, more thorough, less tedious, more challenging, less expensive, and more fun...The Internet turbocharges learning because it brings people together" (Internet Time Group 2003)

By their very nature, these two modes of learning display similarities as well as differences in terms of their nature and focus, setting, teacher/learner relationship, teaching/learning skills and strategies, and learner outcomes, among other things.

It is hypothesized that their differences, which outweigh their similarities, must have bearing on teaching and learning FL and translation skills and strategies. Of course, validating this assumption empirically is of utmost significance, but it is well beyond the scope of this descriptive article to handle owing to

the relatively recent introduction of this mode of learning in the University of Bahrain. Despite its recent advent, e-learning seems to have attracted the attention of many a researcher worldwide. The greatest bulk of research has tackled a variety of aspects pertinent to the newcomer.

This paper sets out to highlight some of the differences between conventional learning and e-learning. The author will draw on his extensive experience in teaching English and translation for Arab university students at different Arab universities as well as his intensive reading of some of the available e-learning literature. After conducting a general comparison between conventional and e-learning in terms of the above issues, the author will attempt the implications of this study for enhancing Arab university students' FL and translation skills and strategies.

2. Conventional learning in perspective

Conventional learning sets restrictions on the place and time of learning as well as the subjects to be learned and the teaching/learning and assessment methodology. To begin with,

learning takes place within the confines of a classroom/lecture hall. Students attend prescheduled classes. The different subjects they study are prescribed in topic, amount and quality by the respective curriculum. Students' achievement is usually assessed by written and less frequently oral exams given at specified dates and times.

In this environment, the teacher and the book are the main sources of knowledge. Availability of reference books is largely contingent on the financial resources of the educational institution. Conventional learning is, in essence, teacher- and book-centered. Major emphasis has for decades been laid on teaching methodology to the almost utter exclusion of learning skills and strategies. This is at least true of FL and translation methodology. A host of teaching methods and approaches have been devised and implemented in the classroom, each claiming to offer the cure for all ills. Some of the most prominent are: the translation method, the structural (aural- oral) method, and the communicative approach. The latter has been, and is still, in vogue for a few decades. However, it does not seem to differ

from other methods in terms of the quality of learner outcomes. This could be attributed to misapplication of the communicative approach by concerned teacher as well as to the teaching/learning environment which does not allow students to use English outside the classroom. No wonder then that Arab students who study English for about twelve years at school and college continue to demonstrate deficient proficiency in English after graduation. A chief reason for this formidable drawback can be partly attributed to the current FL methodology and materials.

According to this methodology, students are mostly exposed to formal written discourse. It follows that they spend years at school and college learning the grammar of this particular variety of language which is not the one native language users utilize in their everyday communication. On the other hand, students are never exposed to the lexico-grammatical and socio-cultural features of spoken discourse, which explains their deficient oral skills. On the other hand, grammar is always introduced in disjointed decontextualized

sentences which do not necessarily simulate those produced by native language users in real communication. Thus, students graduate without being aware of how grammar functions in interpreting and creating real communication. In fact, this type English and teaching methodology represents what Widdowson (1984) as artificial, as stated above. This is because when a student is asked about the whereabouts of a book lying in front of him on the table, two problems arise. Firstly, this is an act of belittling the learner's intelligence since one never asks about what is known and obvious. Secondly, the situation has to be natural rather than invented for certain purposes. Equally important, teachers' insistence on students' providing full answers would also worsen the situation. For example, the answer to the question:

How many barrels of oil does Saudi Arabia produce a day?

is supposed to be

Saudi Arabia produces 10 million barrel a day.

Undoubtedly, this approach certainly has negative pedagogical bearing on the quality of learner outcomes. Learners will be

parroting rigid language forms rather than thinking, analyzing, innovating and contributing to ongoing discourse. This artificiality also holds true of the material which is normally simplified to meet the learner's level or presumed needs. Simplification will definitely distort the authenticity of the text since information is taken out of context.

Arab learners' reading and writing skills, which are particularly relevant to their academic performance, are not much better. Due to crowded FL classes, most students do not usually have the chance to practice reading and writing in class. And the lucky ones may read a few sentences or a short paragraph at most. Writing is often done as a homework assignment. Definitely, some brainstorming takes place, but students rarely, if ever, do any complete writing in class. Furthermore, the relevant skills of outlining, revising and editing these are often than not totally ignored. In short, teaching FL skills is mostly carried out individually rather than collectively.

The current translation methodology is no different from that employed in teaching FL skills. Students are usually

assigned texts to translate without knowing how they differ in terms of their lexico-grammatical and socio-cultural features. Nor are the students made aware of the translation strategies, except using a mono- or bilingual dictionary, which efficient translators opt for when encountering problematic issues. What is surprising though is that students are not even taught how to use the dictionary. Out of the list of meanings it gives for a lexical item, students often select the first meaning (Al-Jabr, forthcoming).

Students also work individually since the translation task is mostly done at home. The teacher usually corrects their mistakes without explaining why certain lexico-grammatical features are more appropriate than others. Thus, translation is also teacher-centered in some way.

This brief outline of the FL and translation situation in Arab schools and colleges makes it clear that in both domains a teacher-centered approach is being implemented in class. Consequently, current learner outcomes do not meet the

community and market needs. E-learning may, to some extent, make up for this deplorable situation.

3. E-learning in perspective

E-learning is a mode of education via the Internet (Khalili 2001). Contrary to conventional learning, this mode is learner-centered. The learner is the focus of the entire learning process. Courses are designed to help learners who cannot make it in the conventional way to get the education they want and eventually qualify for a job. Being carried out off-campus, e-learning makes education available to working and retired people, housewives, and those living far away from conventional colleges. Thus, e-learning addresses the needs and interests of a greater number of learners worldwide. Even regular university students can benefit a lot from this new mode of learning. Besides their conventional classes, they can engage in activities which further their learning scope, enrich their knowledge, and nurture in them new learning styles and strategies. University graduates also can keep updating their knowledge or they may

continue their higher studies and get other academic degrees. In this sense, e-learning can cater for life-long education.

However, some educators seem to have a kind of misconception as to the concept and nature of e-learning. This is specially so in some Arab educational institutions. Some educators conflate it with using the Internet to get access to some supplementary reading, writing or grammar material. This is not e-learning at all. E-learning is a method of qualifying for a degree (i.e. diploma, BA, MA, PhD) in a specific domain of knowledge without attending conventional classes. In this sense, it runs parallel to education.

4. Differences between e-learning and conventional learning

As two modes of education, conventional learning and e-learning display some differences in terms of their nature and focus, setting, teacher/learner relationships and roles, learning skills and strategies and learning outcomes.

4.1 Nature and focus

As stated above, the advent of e-learning has brought about a dramatic shift in the nature and focus of education in general.

Education is no more something an individual can find only within the confines of the book. Nor can learning skills be acquired and brushed up via the intensive reading of printed materials. Still, teachers are no more the sole receptacle of information. Rather, education has no boundaries. It has unlimited space and resources. Learning can take place anywhere, anytime with people of varied cultures, interests and purposes. Learning skills can be better sharpened by direct interaction between learners and teachers. The Internet has made available a wide variety of information resources. People can talk, hear, read, and write and see at the same time.

Despite the challenge posited by e-learning, conventional learning continues to have the same nature and adopt the same methodology which is primarily teacher- and book-centered, as stated above. Thus, the learner and his/her learning styles are still out of the focus of this mode of education. Learning takes place individually and team work has little place, if any. In such a learning environment, learners' participation is minimal. They continue to play a subordinate role in the whole learning

process. Learners either listen to lectures or sporadically take notes or posit questions to the teacher. Their role is largely to memorize information verbatim rather than think, analyze and evaluate concepts. Individual learning leaves each student to think for himself/herself. In short, conventional learning in this manner is no more than spoon feeding. This applies equally to both FL and translation classes.

In contrast, e-learning may make up for such deficiencies. As stated previously, the learner is the major player in the entire process. S/he collects information, sifts it and gets what is required for the specific task. This is done in collaboration with other learners and under the guidance of the teacher. The team work, which constitutes the very nature of e-learning, certainly polishes learner's skills and enriches their experiences. Thus, this mode of learning allows for direct interaction between learners across different countries. They run their seminars and workshops, and they exchange ideas via video conferencing.

4.2 Setting

Undeniably, the place and the time of learning must have a positive or negative impact on the entire learning process. As mentioned above, in conventional learning, learners attend classes which are pre-scheduled in terms of place and time.

These restrictions may have negative psychological influence on learners and their learning styles. Learning does not take place adequately if the learner is not in mood or if s/he is fatigued. On the contrary, this may enhance his/her tension, stress and anxiety. In other words, s/he will lack motivation and enthusiasm, which are crucial factors for appropriate learning.

In contrast, an e-learner chooses the time and place most convenient to him/her. S/he works at any time in any place. An e-learner can study at home, in his bed, in a virtual café, etc. In addition, an e-learner monitors the duration of the learning process. S/he can work for minutes or hours. The learner can study whenever s/he is relaxed and psychologically willing to do so. This, in turn, enriches his/her motivation and interest. Thus, the learning outcome will certainly be of much better quality.

4.3 Teacher/learner relationships and roles

As mentioned above, a conventional class is a one-man show.

The teacher is the main and probably the sole player. He disseminates information, asks questions and chooses class activities. Moreover, s/he mostly maintains formal relationship with his/her students who sometimes need to make an appointment to meet him/her. Even when they meet, it is normally a very formal and short meeting. It mostly takes place in his/her office. This kind of formal relationship would probably intensify the learner's tension, stress and anxiety.

In contrast, the friendly teacher-learner relationship in an e-learning environment undoubtedly alleviates tension, if not curbs it completely, and consequently increases learners' motivation and willingness to learn. In an e-learning class, the teacher is no longer the boss and the only source of information, but he is rather a guide, a mentor, a facilitator who offers help or gives advice when and as required. Very often, the teacher does not appear on the scene. That is, communication between teacher and learner often takes place via email. This, in a way,

frees the learner who wishes to work on his/her own away from the teacher's surveillance. Thus, e-learning, unlike conventional learning, enhances interpersonal relationships, which is of paramount significance for appropriate learning (Berge, 1995).

4.4 Learning strategies

In a conventional class, students do not often have the opportunity to manipulate varied learning strategies which develop their skills. Major attention is given to grammar and less frequently to reading and writing. As previously stated, learners parrot and memorize grammatical forms. They are not aware how such forms work in real communication. They mostly use old copies of textbooks which have ready-made answers, or they illicitly get it from the answer key which is sometimes near at hand. This mechanical and atomistic approach applies to other language skills. In a reading class students often utilize only one single strategy. That is, they match words in both the question and the text, and consequently they produce answers without being certain whether they are correct or not. In a writing class, students listen to the teacher

passively and wait for the assigned task which is, as said above, often done at home. Speaking, on the other hand, is out of the question in this learning environment. Students' voices are heard only when answering sporadic questions, which is not communication at all. In short, the learning strategies in this situation are either very much limited or inappropriate.

However, in order not to put all the blame on the teacher, it should be noted that the nature of the course fosters this type of teaching methodology. Most language courses require students to fill in blanks or complete isolated sentences or identify the correct form of certain lexico-grammatical forms. Different exercises, especially vocabulary and grammar, are so lengthy that the teacher has to move as fast as s/he can to cover the prescribed material on time. In addition, the nature of those exercises does not sometimes give rise to any kind of thinking. After all, they are of the type Widdowson describes as artificial English. This is quite true because students are not exposed to natural discourse occurring in real socio-cultural contexts. Rather, they deal with bits and pieces of language forms which

are concocted by the author or course designer to provide mechanical drills that learners have to parrot, no matter whether they understand or not.

This atomistic teaching/learning approach is also implemented in translation classes. Accordingly, students employ limited and inadequate strategies. They depend mainly on dictionaries to find meanings of new or unfamiliar lexical elements. The stylistic characteristics of the given text (i.e. sentence structure, fronting, parallelism, etc.) as well as other contextual features (i.e. author/translator's intention, audience, format, setting, etc.) are almost entirely ignored. Text analysis as a relevant strategy which must be carried out prior to any translation task is not usually practiced. As stated above, post-translation strategies such as revising and editing are nearly completely neglected.

In contrast, e-learners always have the opportunity to utilize more and diversified strategies. Being a team work process, e-learning stipulates that learners brainstorm ideas and analyze information before arriving at solutions. This sharing

aspect of e-learning fosters the manipulation of individual and collective strategies to solve arising problems. In such an atmosphere, learners have the time to resort to their prior experiences and world knowledge which form an integral component of an appropriate learning process. This is particularly significant in a FL and translation situation.

5. Implications of e-learning for acquiring FL and translation skills

The physical and psychological atmosphere which e-learning offers must have positive implications for teaching/learning FL and translation skills. As argued above, this mode of learning can benefit conventional education students if handled properly.

To begin with, exposing Arab students to authentic English discourse can improve their spoken and written skills. No doubt that listening to the native English accent and intonation can immensely polish up their speech. Furthermore, engaging in actual communication familiarizes them with the linguistic and socio-cultural constraints imposed on conversation (i.e. initiating and closing a conversation, taking and giving the floor, interrupting, overlapping, managing their language, etc.) Thus,

they can use the FL in similar socio-communicative settings.

Last but not least, engaging in actual communication with native speakers familiarizes them with varied accents and dialects and hence develops their linguistic and communicative competence and performance.

Arab students' reading and writing skills can also be much improved when they engage with native and non-native language users in such tasks. The e-learning environment gives them time to read or write at their ease prior to the actual virtual class. Exchanging ideas about the reading text can make them aware of certain missing information and/or the multi-layer meaning of the given text. In addition, the feedback they get after reading their written assignment to other students will certainly make them spot and rectify their errors as well as other learner's problems. Learners will also become aware of the fact that other learners do have problems. This may alleviate their embarrassment and hence they become more active participants in class discussions. This environment will also give students sufficient time to proofread, revise and edit their assignments.

The benefit would also be remarkable for translation students. Comparing their translations with those of other students, they can not only improve the given assignment, but it can also teach them certain strategies which will become part of their skill.

Thus, e-learning can consolidate their learning strategies and eventually their overall skills. In fact, this is the prime objective of this mode of learning, to teach learners how to learn.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The previous discussion clearly demonstrates that e-learning can play a prominent role in enhancing the learning strategies and skills of Arab FL and translation students. Despite its crucial advantages, e-learning should not replace conventional learning. Rather, it can play a complementary role which reinforces what is learnt in the conventional class. In case e-learning is difficult to provide, the implications of this mode of learning can be applied in conventional classes. Team work has to be encouraged, so students can exchange ideas and experiences,

analyze information, correct their own errors, and by and large develop their own learning strategies.

To achieve the utmost of this new mode of learning, however, it is recommended that the tasks have to be selected and worked quite carefully. Each task must have a clear objective which has to be checked at the end of the learning session to make sure that it has been met. Depending on the level of individual learners, tasks can be quite varied in terms of their linguistic and conceptual difficulty. And in order to implement e-learning adequately and appropriately, a well-trained team of instructors must be available. The instructors involved should be encouraged to participate in conferences, attend training workshops, and engage in sound research. Experts on e-learning have to be occasionally invited, so Arab teachers can exchange experiences, update their knowledge and eventually brush up their teaching and technical skills. Finally, this new mode of learning makes it imperative that educators and course designers rethink their methods so that learning of a better quality can be achieved.

The optimal objective of any learning process must be to help students learn how to learn.

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