Technology in the language classroom: Prometheus or Panurge?

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Résumé

notre propos essaie de repositionner le débat sur les TIC dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères. Face au mimétisme technologique ambiant, nous avons souhaité développer une attitude plus circonspecte en essayant de montrer tout l'intérêt que l'enseignant a à se méfier de l'effet mode pour maîtriser le dit outil et non se faire dominer par lui. Car si l'enseignant est bien un facteur du changement, il se doit de permettre à l'étudiant de devenir Prométhée afin d'utiliser de façon optimale les TIC.

Foreign language classroom practices have tried to keep up with innovations right through centuries, at times for a more efficient teaching or learning, on other occasions with no significant advancement. Indeed, in recent times, technology has progressively entered schools and universities for the benefit of cohorts of learners in search for the magic means to improve their learning outcomes. However tantalizing this new set of techniques can be, it has also raised questions as to its use. This is the core of the present paper because one feels that some caution is needed to help technology reach the goal one hopes to achieve in their language classroom.

As I see it, the problematics of technology in the classroom is twofold:

- the political vision towards the implementation of technology in all sectors of public and private life in Algeria
- its inclusion and share in the global methodology in foreign language teaching and learning.

Because the whole world has entered an era of globalised information, Algeria has felt the need to develop a policy, which was named: **Stratégie e-Algérie 2013.** However, after the good news came the less enjoyable part: the policy of e-Algeria 2013 is lagging behind schedule, despite the rather ambitious policy towards the implementation of a digital revolution in all educational, economic, social, political and cultural sectors. The proof of failure of such a policy is the low index of development of ICTs in all sectors of economy and education. The penetration of ICTs in Algeria does not exceed 2%, while it is around 5% in Qatar. The causes of such a slow start are: communication through ICTs is embryonic and the policy of scientific vulgarization towards the whole population, non-existent. One can even speak of a dire absence of a culture of cyber-services. E-Algérie 2013 was supposed to improve the citizen's quality of life, to guarantee the efficiency of the administration's services but also improve the quality of these services and why not, Knowledge? It is true that what is lacking most is a culture of the cyber-service that is necessary for education, management and leisure.

Unfortunately, on the educational plane, e-education is way behind despite the genuine preoccupation of the government to equip all educational institutions with half a million PCs. But the physical presence of ICTs is in no way equivalent to a true development in the sector. At university level, the digital stock is immense. But would quantity be sufficient to bring about not just technological innovation but also pedagogical change? What about the integration of emerging technologies in the

curricula? What about the 'hybrid' approach to learning and teaching? These questions are meant to go beyond the gimmick aspect of things to end with the real impact of technology to enhance the conditions of learning. One has to systematize the use of it so that the university community of practice integrates the tool in its imaginary and daily practices. However, we believe things have to be generalized as early as the primary cycle to develop a fossilized habit to avoid the phase of idolatry in order to proceed to a phase of proactiveness. Proactivity where the initiative is given to all pedagogical actors is bound to develop creativity and not mimicry. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have to be used in a creative way to avoid surrendering to the fashionable aspect of the object. For that, one must develop endogenous research networks, collaboration platforms and knowledge servers. Besides, all types of publications, literary, scientific and technical, have to be put online to increase the stock of authentic materials.

In addition, a rationale for the use of ICTs has to be defined along with the language component. Thus three basic questions have to be worded out:

- What is the most **operative definition** to give to language for its inclusion in the ICTs? The one that seems to be most congruent with today's language tasks and the nearest to language needs is language as communication.
- No less important is the 'how' to **teach** foreign languages ***through*** and ***with*** ICTs. The former concerns the importance and uniqueness of the means whereas in the latter the ICTs are only one means amongst others.
- Last but not least, is the question directly associated with the **learning** ***through*** and ***with*** ICTs. Once again, the whole question boils down to its use and its priority in the whole education enterprise.

Our problematics being an efficient use of ICTs, we would like to avoid pure imitation in order to make room for imaginative teaching/learning practices, we wish to question the inclusion of ICTs by throwing another debated point, namely, whether a slavish utilization of ICTs does lead to a real change of paradigm at the didactic and pedagogical levels. Our feeling is that only an active and critical use of ICTs will yield better learning outcomes.

We think that along this line, what is pivotal in didactics, is the notions of accountability, emancipation, self-actualization and sense of criticism in order to adapt to the present ever-developing knowledge society, to risk-taking and where multilingualism is the cornerstone of the student's development. Indeed, in this globalised world, monolingualism is often equated with illiteracy. Therefore, a proactive learner is definitely Prometheus in today's world. This is why teachers must equip him with the necessary strategies to face problem-solving situations. These strategies concern:

- ✓ the metacognitive level: learn to think, plan to learn, control understanding, monitor oral/written productions, self-assess. Besides, by developing compensation strategies to facilitate the flow of learning, the student will increase his chances to succeed.
- ✓ the cognitive level: in order to use adequately and critically technological/technical equipment
- ✓ the affective level: in order to reduce the anxiety level of differing learning situations, and develop motivation instead.
- ✓ the social level: increase peer-to-peer interactions, introduce collaborative activities for team spirit

But the strategies would mean nothing without adequate equipment, even if the latter is not too sophisticated. There is, however, a note of dissatisfaction with the level of inclusion of ICTs at university level. Universities seem to be caught between the rock and a hard base, i.e., the technological deficit and its backwardness. In fact, both inadequacies characterize present day use of ICTs, not to say anything on its integration and use in classroom situations. Despite the richness of these techniques, one has not yet got any feedback on ICT use, one wonders about the many uses of the following means:

- Internet /Web/chat (for synchronous communication)
- emails: towards asynchronous communication in order to develop the reading and writing skills
- Blogs : for collaborative writing
- Wikis
- Podcasts that provide authentic materials
- Interactive boards that help motivate students
- Google Docs and Google Talk (interactions)

Once again, one rues the fact that despite the demonstrated importance of hybrid curricula (i.e., activities which could be done online and in more traditional classrooms), the development of hybrid language learning is still in the realm of the virtual despite the learners' openness towards the use of technology. There is a point to be raised here; it concerns the individuality, personality, language learning styles/preferences of students. Any technological item is as good as the user's capacity, risk-taking and learning preference. If some students are real technology addicts, others have developed a technical phobia. Besides, one must also be imaginative when it comes to using technology in an innovative way.

In Algeria, technology is just like any buzzword, though its availability and complexity may pose extra problems. So, in today's era of the new technologies, their pedagogy is still to be defined, for it is obvious that very often, teachers carry on the same traditional methodologies spoiling an opportunity to change their practices.
First and foremost, one should be wary of misusing technology in the classroom. Very often, people use technology because it is done elsewhere, and then, out of pure mimesis teachers accept the same procedure. In that case, are ICTs a necessity? I believe this is the case. Our classroom practices are still outdated and not efficient enough, hence the need to have these supporting technologies. On a different scale, the yield of these ICTs is very low. Cost-wise, the ICTs are not giving their money's worth because of the teachers' technical illiteracy. Is this a question of lack of training or are teachers not imaginative enough? I believe the first hypothesis to be the better answer.

To sum up, one must have real answers to the questions raised before. Mimesis or necessity? One must avoid being a trend-follower by developing competencies to become a trendsetter. One must then be creative enough to face the complexity of the means, but also the individualization of learning and the relatively inadaptable content. Connected to this point is that of the learning styles and learning preferences. Faced with a complex means for learning, learners must renew their learning styles so that their learning preferences change with the new technologies. So, the real debate is: how to learn, comprehend and understand the new types of

knowledge, and possibly how to solve today's learning difficulties by exploiting the ICTs fully.

Finally, it is in the opposition between: Épimetheus (the one who thinks too late or lacks foresight) vs. Prometheus (the one who can be farsighted and acts accordingly) that the problematics of technology in the classroom is situated. The stakes are high when one uses technology for learning languages. The answer is not to follow the trendy methodologies, or the pedagogical and technical herd instinct. The difference between the former and the latter attitude is between the one who follows blindly while the other is ready to jeopardize his learning habits by acting. The promethean approach is for the one who feels always the necessity to create and puts him on a tight rope. The epimethean process leads learners to follow and adopt supposedly safer methodologies. It is also the one that becomes a fashion-victim. Educating is in no way a matter of fashions.

In Algeria, technology looks like a word in vogue, or even a string of incantations or a statistical concern (just the number of PCs in a learning context) it is rarely a question of methodology. So, in front of the "Net Generation" and the technologies based on Internet (Google, wikis, Blogs, Skype, YouTube, Podcast, and the websites of social networks) teachers have to allow ICT-user to be more independent though critical, more challenging than adoptive, more imaginative than passive. Learning is then not simply a question of which technology means to use when developing one's competences, but whether one could liberate themselves from debilitating pedagogies or frustration-generating technological means.