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ICT and Paradox of Autonomy in the Iranian Context of Learning French as a Foreign Language

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Abstract: The Information and Computer Technology (ICT) focuses on the individualistic model and promotes autonomy and independence. Iranian learners find themselves lost in a situation mediated by ICT; they find neither educational and cultural habits, nor their educational benchmarks. This paper tries to identify, by analyzing the Iranian context of the teaching/learning of French as a Foreign Language (FFL), the paradox of autonomy in language courses using ICT. Earlier studies, concerning the autonomy process of learning also emphasize the weight of social representations and habits which they produce. The ability to take responsibility for language learning is not innate, or a simple process, or shared by all, and does not develop in all activities in the same way. Because of this, we see various forms of autonomy arise (general autonomy, language and learning). The results of our research based on an experimentation reveals that autonomy in learning a foreign language with ICT needs a strong intellectual discipline, methodological skills, and metacognition. When these skills are not mastered early in the learners' experience, it is necessary to take into consideration the social significance of cultural capital of learners seriously in order to facilitate the process of using ICT.

Key words: ICT, educational culture, autonomy, FFL

1. Introduction

In general, teaching foreign languages by ICT methodologies have never been integrated into the school and university system where it is the dominant traditional methodology. The arrival of a technological tool in the language classroom is very innovative in the local context, but the implementation of this tool has responded only partially to its intrinsic goals. It is certainly difficult to say that the goal set to cause a change in the role of the learner has actually been achieved. This design raises several questions in learning when confronted with concept of autonomy in the ICT uses. The autonomy is both an end and a means and a prerequisite goal, which is ironic, since it would mean to become independent, one must first be autonomous (Barbot, 2001, p. 22).

Using a computer puts the learner (alone or in pairs) against knowledge (foreign language); that is to say a designer faces missing where it has no control most often. He, however, is free to take his time and organize in his own way, which may be a form of individualization and autonomy (Bourdieu broadly defines autonomy as the capacity to generate its own within mechanisms operating capital). If the role of these technologies is to develop learners' individual learning abilities, we try to identify, by analyzing the Iranian context of teaching/learning of French as a Foreign Language (FFL), the paradox of autonomy in language courses using ICT. On the other hand,

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the educational culture of Iranian learners faces the promise of autonomy by ICT. The analysis of learner's skills based on the Iranian educational culture, the role of the tutor as a mediator, and the pair in the context of teaching/learning by ICT will get to the heart of the matter.

2. The Learner's Skills

Using ICT, the learner enters into a relationship with knowledge (foreign language) in the form of mediated learning resources; s/he interacts with the knowledge represented therein. This interaction is facilitated through educational treatment that has been applied in the design of resources. This form of simulated interaction aims to develop the learner's intellectual active attitude. It plays a mediating role to put the learner in contact with the knowledge and lead to the meaning. This didactic dialogue is what Daniel Peraya (1999, cited by Henri, 2010, p. 164) calls the intentional interactivity, "which is characterized by the reconstruction of a situation interlocution between a perpetrator physically absent, yet present in the footprint it leaves through the document publicized". In this mediated situation, can the Iranian learners interact independently with knowledge?

Iranian learners often have a reaction of resistance vis-à-vis self-learning because it is a rather traumatic novelty (assuming the learning is difficult) and it is much safer to be in charge, which, incidentally, can reject learning failure. Contesting the merits of classical training does not guarantee the ability or willingness to take responsibility for their learning and, except for a few learners, autonomy is not an initial skill. Indeed, there are many obstacles to learning: the risk of insecurity due to the questioning of student habits, lack of motivation and perseverance, and the absence of effective technical work. In addition, many of these students do not seem to be attracted by the acquisition of communicative competence presented by ICT. They seek linguistic knowledge (and/or high culture: literature and civilization) and do not care about "living language". Learners are often on the first step in the search for a language code (how to understand and be understood) and perhaps cultural knowledge and not a communicative approach. Their application includes grammar, but little or no communication skills. These learners prefer the acquisition of a grammar and a basic vocabulary (how it works) capable of fulfilling their language needs: linguistic competence than communicative competence. But how could it be otherwise? On the one hand, they seek to find and to continue learning to in a way which they are accustomed, on the other, the education offered is poorly suited to public and does not motivate. In such a situation mediated by ICT, the Iranian learner is then faced with a dilemma that seems insoluble. The learner is faced with one (or more) didactic approaches s/he does not understand that demotivate, and the strategies that would implement it, will not learn anything. This is because the autonomy in language learning doesn't exist in the cultural education of the Iranian learners. While in individualistic Western societies, professional education willingly advocates individualism, autonomy.

Self-sufficiency is composed of three components and three dimensions of control over learning. The three main components of this capacity (and there may be more) are: competence, desire, and freedom. Learners should have the knowledge and skills necessary to control their learning with ICT; they must want to learn, and they should be allowed to do so (Benson, 2009, pp. 9–10). This type of learning is seeking a strong intellectual and personal discipline, methodological skills and metacognition. Not having mastered all these skills and attitudes in their early learning experiences (Henri, 2010, p. 163), Iranian learners of FFL resist use of ICT because they haven't the necessary competence of independence. On a functional level, the learner must take ownership of the technical operation of the device, that is to say, be able to interact with the system by controlling the operating

rules specific to a software product on the educational level, but s/he is not able to exploit the educational potential of the device. In terms of learning a foreign language by ICT, there is the process of appropriation in which the user/learner is really an actor. This is a costly process involving preparation and support with both self-training and specific media: “Whatever the type of use, ownership builds the relationship with the object communication and use has de facto a cognitive and empirical. Its construction involves process knowledge (discovery of logic and functionality of the object), know-how (learning codes and procedure of the machine), and practical skills” (Jouët, 2000, p. 502). The media makes a transition to a more independent learning in some aspects: the choice of objective, decoding, rhythm, access. But in return, it redefines the expected type of mediation, at least for a period of initiation, the trainer.

Over time, with the support of the tutor and the emulation of his peers, the learner develops his skills and ability to act. S/he acts on him/herself, s/he acts on learning, s/he becomes an active agent of the training process. The learner has to interact with a device techno-pedagogical. S/he finds him/herself in a managed environment, where runs a learning activity supported by technology and contact with peers and tutor. But why does s/he need a tutor to become independent? Can we find the answer in the educational culture of Iranians learners and the importance of human interaction (tutor-pairs)?

2.1 Educational Culture Face the Impact of ICT

Basically the ICT for foreign languages focuses on the individualistic model and promotes autonomy and independence. But Iranian learners find themselves lost in the face the ICT. They find neither educational and cultural habits, nor their educational benchmarks. The courses of FFL are not focused on explanations and grammar instruction, and learners are strongly encouraged to learn independently. The learning culture of the departure of most students is related to facing the traditional classroom. The majority of learners are affected by the lack of more traditional teaching of grammar, which they are accustomed. They are confronted with a radical change, disturbance factor, and insecurity: an education that promotes the expression and communication, stimulates oral expression, etc. This way of conducting a class is as novel as it is confusing. Their path to an autonomous learning by ICT is a break of habits, behaviors, and representations embedded in a context different from previous. The usage of ICT in the course of FFL caused a confrontation with the Iranian educational culture, an obstacle to integrate these technologies into the process of teaching/learning.

According Beacco (2008, p. 7), an educational culture is a set of traits configuring the educational process in a given society, constituted by “educational philosophies, educational institutions and practices of transmission knowledge”. It includes “the idea that educational activities and learning traditions form as a set of constraints that affect teachers and learners in part.” Regarding contextualization, the description of the local educational culture is crucial because it consists of “the ground on which are grafted teaching methodologies modern or scientific” (Ibid, p. 8). Denis Simard (2002), explains that “teaching is a part, to demonstrate mediation over the past culture which is in the form of a legacy to preserve and transmit”. It is complex to implement in educational contexts openly advocating the empowerment of learning, and the process of empowerment can be a real challenge in an educational system on its traditionalist conception of knowledge transfer. Educational policies tend to favor forms of exogenous pedagogy (i.e., marked by the imposition of an external knowledge) characterized by pervasiveness of the standard transmission of masterful knowledge and clear centering on the act of teaching, rather than the act of learning as in the West. Their endogenous pedagogy is embodied in the “active methods” incorporating variation and preliminary heterogeneity co-construction of knowledge.

While the majority of Iranians learners prefer a traditional approach to language, it is not only because they understand the teaching/learning of foreign languages well, but also because self-directed learning is not a priority. They research the internal logic of the foreign language with explicit grammar by the teacher (Otroshi & Bourdet, 2012). The Iranian learner expects the ICT that helps to build its grammatical system in a foreign language by offering consistency and he could not understand laying down rules and exceptions. Because respect at least at first institutional requirements and expectations of learners is a primary condition sine qua non, even and especially if you want to get free or simply evolve (Puren, 2005).

Comparing the results of our study conducted on empowering Iranian learners of FFL has allowed us to identify the characteristics of the educational culture of our own students who do stand out clearly from the educational culture in Europe. It is therefore necessary that the learners are psychologically ready to use their educational background or experience, but also that the educational system promotes flexibility in arranging the spaces where they can actually take ownership of their learning and exercise autonomy in the matter. To change the education system to encourage learning from/with ICT means, de facto, to transform the educational system against sudden change social perceptions of stakeholders. But this is an area where resistance to change is particularly strong because the teacher-centered teaching is at the heart of the Iranian educational system. Radical transformation upsets a set of fragile balances. By changing their way of learning, we disrupt their way of defining what is central or peripheral skills in language (linguistic, grammatical), and what is valued and what is not (the oral communication). Specifically, foresee the learners and guess that offering to change their way of learning with the usage of ICT can disrupt their educational culture based on the traditional triangle (Teacher-learner-foreign language) where the role of ICT is not defined as a virtual mediator, nor the autonomy as a value. So, it must take into account the fact that the Iranian learner cannot move from a culture of teaching to a total learning culture without minimal precautions of any kind if it does not protagonists encounter or be ineffective, without minimal precautions in the transition, or the strategy will be ineffective (Pothier, 2003).

3. The Role of Tutor

Faced with ICT, the Iranian learner is confronted with an acquaintance (foreign language) that is not able to provide with a true “act of learning”. This raises the question of the necessary presence and intervention of the tutor (Hirschsprung, 2005). The majority of learners confirmed that the tutor's role is essential, especially since s/he is also the only resource person external to the product, answering the questions of the learners and in encouraging them to rethink their course knowledge, it requires distance from the virtual reality (Herrmann, 2003), in which the learners would tend to learn alone. Multimedia pedagogy must not be a substitute therefore for any other forms of learning such as classroom teaching by example, but must complement and enrich it. For Iranian learners, the tutor is the one who has experience, knowledge, and from which we come to inquire about the authenticity, that is to say, “the credibility of the product” (Ibid.). The teacher's scaffolding interventions play an essential role in learning and the success of the training: cognitive, affective, and organizational in the course of FFL. The importance of human mediation to provide support in a training using ICT has now been repeatedly demonstrated (Nissen, Poyet & Soubrié, 2011, p. 97). It remains true that learning devices and empowering learners (i.e., transfer to the learner decisions about their learning), even if they are spreading more and more, are more often perceived as innovations in Europe and elsewhere. Thus, the research culture of teaching-learning culture shows pretty much the omnipresent figure of the teacher as an actor who “directs the learning” (Carton,

2011, p. 57).

However, in the context of FFL, if self-learning is not accompanied by a methodological support-guided approach, it is doomed to failure because there is the risk of dispersion: indulgement in zapping, simply immediate communication that emphasizes the act of understanding, neglecting the correction in the expression. The presence of the teacher/tutor, and his/her interviews and observations also show how it is reassurance, especially for learners whose command of the language is low. Iranians learners of FFL need on-going support that could be provided by the presence of resources (teachers/tutors, teaching materials, etc.). The transition to self-regulation depends in part because the tutor quits guiding the learner, at the risk that the result is not satisfactory. The teacher has many roles to play when using media and should act as a specialist of the language and learning in the local context. However, the choice of learning autonomously for the Iranian learners remains fairly superficial as they are not accompanied by real support to learning.

4. The Role of Pairs

The pedagogical relationship that emerges also maintains that the learner interacts with the tutor and peers. The majority of learners confirmed that interactions with peers were helpful; however, they needed a tutor to explain the grammar and the pronunciation of French. As simulated dialogue didactic, these interactions promote the reconstruction of knowledge, but this time through the exchange of sharing and collaboration. Add that the pedagogical relationship is not limited only to cognitive; mediation extends to metacognitive, motivational and socio-emotional dimensions of learning (Henri, 2010). Interview results confirm the necessity of social ties in independent work by the preference of the learners to work in pairs, in groups, or as indicated, certain stated requirements: a request for improved communication between learners or tutor. Indeed, this result confirms the role of peers interactions and/or the tutor (Bourdages & al., 2001). The cognitive activity of the learner, making an emotionally and socially meaningful exchange with the instructor and peers, mediated by ICT can become, in fact, a true intermediate area of “cognitive repairs” (Linard, 1996, p. 171). It seems that the early learning with ICT needed a tutor, but gradually it turned to the peer, so that the learner could have more autonomy. In fact, the tutor and peer can play the role of second meditators in the context of learning mediated by ICT to improve the “march to independence” (Porcher, 1981). In the words of Vygotsky, “learning as he described the passage of the regulation of behaviour by others to autonomic regulation” (Bange, 2005, p. 54). Because, “this ability is not innate, it must acquire, either naturally or through formal learning” (Holec, 1979, p. 31). Indeed, if we assume that “autonomy is always something to which we are going, we built that you can never have completely” (Porcher, 1981), we cannot talk about self-empowerment without autonomy. On the other hand, this process of empowerment is akin to a process of releasing a dogma (which in our context is the dogma of the teacher) or dependency links (the teacher). So, considering autonomy as a kind of ideal, never really reaching our goal to empower learners more directly related to learning, such as the development of their ability to learning a foreign language mediated by ICT.

5. Conclusion

The notion of empowerment that Porcher called the “march to independence”, in our context, was the primary objective. But, the results of our experimentation reveal that after a semester, the majority of students were not able to spontaneously adopt good attitudes to a complex situation: find the right path, prioritize

information to make the right choices, achieve the goal without getting lost, etc. However, this requires a high degree of metacognition that does not come naturally, especially as in most school systems and universities, the development of this behavior management was not integrated learning. The ability to take responsibility for their language learning is not innate or a simple process nor shared by all, and does not develop in all activities in the same way and especially because we see various forms of autonomy arise (general autonomy, language and learning) (Rivens Mompean & Eisenbeis, 2009, p. 221). Autonomy in the context of learning mediated by ICT is a training objective that must be supported educationally if you decide to promote it (learning to learn). It involves mental capacity to take distance from his own efforts, to analyse and formalize his own strategies to optimize and manage independently. In an effort towards autonomy, the need arises to connect the development of strategic competence of learners and strategic control of the learning process. This is equivalent to assuming that autonomy cannot be taken for granted from the outset, but it is necessary to integrate the acquisition in training devices themselves. It is, therefore, to design activities in which the learner is actually acting as part of the learning process, to encourage first practical action only after being tested and, through a proper process be formalized and conceptualized, that is really intellectualized (Hirschsprung, 2005).

Indeed, the anchor of our research is the role of culture in learning with ICT concept at the centre of current sociocultural education, which leads to the conclusion that knowledge can not only be taught, but built by the learning through an educational culture, hence the importance of the social and cultural environment. However, if we consider that the learner has recourse to his own cultural construction of knowledge to face new form (s) of learning, and that this system depends on habit, then it appears that the development of this capacity is likely to encounter various obstacles in the Iranian context. ICT offers the hope of being independent without taking into consideration the educational culture of its clients, so there is a paradox in the idea of becoming autonomous with ICT in the local context.

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