Impact of E–Adoption on Teaching and Learning in the Context of Teaching French

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ABSTRACT

Growing use of information technology and communication (ICT) tools in language courses with communication at their core has brought opportunities as well as challenges in the predominantly conventional face-to-face context of the classroom. When the French programme in the Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages at The Chinese University of Hong Kong started to integrate an e-learning platform into all language courses, students as well as teachers showed reservations and even disbelief. However, it was unexpected to observe such an interdependent relationship between new technologies and the conventional teaching approach. In this paper, the broad implications of the e-adoption applied to learning French as a foreign language are investigated to highlight students’ learning habits and learning process. The strategies used to make technology act as a facilitator across cultures, and various ways to savoir-faire diffusion are also discussed. The study shows how new technologies modify in-class teaching, while the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning approach can influence choices in the use of different web tools that lead to blended models of education.

TEACHING AND LEARNING FRENCH IN HONG KONG: A CHALLENGING SITUATION

Hong Kong is a territory where East meets West: cultures and languages are embraced, making the former British Colony quite a unique and linguistically complex place to live. Since the handover to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), students are expected to become fluent in three languages – English and two Chinese languages, Cantonese (the dominant local dialect) and Putonghua (or Mandarin, the official language of the PRC). Moreover, as part as their school and later university curriculum, students have the option of studying another foreign language.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0041-6.ch017
In secondary school in Hong Kong, language learning is traditionally memorization-oriented and focuses on grammar and translation, rather than on communication (Rao, 2001). As a result, when joining a university, local students’ learning habits are often challenged, as they have to adapt to new learning and teaching styles. In an attempt to make learning and teaching more efficient, the French programme at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) opted for the integration of e-based material and activities into their syllabi in a blended model of learning and teaching. The specific aim of this case study is to analyze the interdependence between the face-to-face teaching and the technologies applied to university education in Hong Kong.

A detailed survey of the whole programme was conducted in January 2008 involving 229 students (Joly, 2009). Responses to questions about learning habits confirmed the conventional notion that East Asian students share common patterns of learning and perception (Worthey, 1987): preference was given to a certain learning modalities. Reading and writing were chosen over listening and speaking although the later were also desired. Emphasis was put on the grammar–translation method, rote memory and repetition – strategies which have been acknowledged as the dominating teaching/learning style in learning English in most East Asian countries (Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Rao, 2001), along with a detail- and precision-oriented approach that involves dissecting and analyzing the learning material (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). The tendency to learn through reading explains students’ request to have visual material (Reid, 1987), as well as their general shyness and low oral participation in the classroom – fewer speaking turns showed by Sato (1981) and lack of taking risk in conversation analyzed by Oxford, Hollaway, and Murillo (1992).

In this regard the French programme’s teaching style did not match with CUHK students’ predominant learning habits. The programme uses textbooks that are based on the communicative approach and its socio-constructivist framework (Vygotsky, 1934). This teaching methodology relies on the Common European Reference of Framework for languages (CERF), which is action-oriented and task-based (European Council, 2000). It is founded on the belief that learning should no longer be understood as a process of reproduction; it is rather a construction process in which learners build up their knowledge while conducting tasks (Piaget, 1969).

In recent years, the universities in Hong Kong have been focusing on an outcomes-based approach (Carless, Joughin, Liu, & Associates, 2006) and assessing programmes by analyzing their outcomes. This makes sense with the political and ideological leadership of Hong Kong, which bases success on society’s efficiency and productivity. In this regard the French programme with its competence-based approach (Gérard, 2003) is certainly consistent with CUHK’s policy.

**IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FRENCH PLATFORM FRE0000**

When implementing the e-learning platform FRE0000, the French programme aimed to support existing face-to-face teaching practice. Support was provided in terms of:

- Reinforcement of language and culture learning;
- Reduction of in-class workload; and
- Extension of face-to-face teaching and learning.

The layout of the platform was organized accordingly, with distinct sections for communication, learning support and course-related activities and projects. The freeware software package Moodle was preferred over WebCT (both platforms are supported at CUHK) or conventional websites as it was seen to offer a wide range of tools, was user-friendly, provided a restricted
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