CULTURAL ISSUES IN ONLINE COLLABORATIVE INSTRUCTION IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

The present study reports results of an experiment in which the author and her students at King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia shared an online grammar course with a professor and his students at Umm Al-Qura University (UQU) in Makkah, Saudi Arabia using www.makkahelearning.net. The experiment proved to be a total failure. The cultural factors contributing to students' inadequate participation in the online course, and hesitation to register and interact are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of students and instructors around the world are using Online Management Systems like Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle or Nicenet in teaching all kinds of EFL/ESL courses. The effects of sharing online courses by students in several institutes was investigated by few studies. For example, in a study conducted by Al-Jarf (2004), Saudi female students shared an online writing course with a group of Ukrainian and Russian students learning English as a foreign language. The aims of the project were to develop students' writing skills in EFL, to develop their awareness of local and global cultural issues and events, and to develop their ability to communicate and interact with students from other cultures. Students' responses to the post-treatment questionnaire showed gains in writing skills, positive attitudes among Saudi, Ukrainian and Russian students towards their online experience, and showed an interest in participating in similar projects in the future. The effect of sharing online courses in grammar instruction by students at several Saudi universities was not investigated by prior research.

As in many developing countries, use of online courses in EFL instruction in some higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia is not yet known due to insufficient numbers of PC's, lack of internet connectivity in some

colleges, lack of trained instructors in IT skills, and lack of administrative support. Few individual attempts are now available here and there. Few instructors are using Online Writing Collaboration Project (OWCP) and Moodle to teach writing, grammar, literature, linguistics and others. For example, Al-Jarf (2005) used an online course in the teaching of English grammar to EFL freshman students from home. She found that the integration of online learning in grammar instruction significantly improved EFL freshman students' achievement and attitudes. Ali Abu-Reesh, who has two Online Course Management Systems, offers several online courses in language, linguistics and literature to his graduate and undergraduate students at Umm Al-Qura University. Several instructors at Imam University and King Saud University in Riyadh, King Abdul-Aziz University, in Jeddah and the Women's College in Makkah use online courses offered by OWCP. All of the above courses are non-credit courses, as they are used as a supplement to in-class instruction and registration and participation by the students are optional.

In the present study, EFL freshman students enrolled in a grammar course at King Saud University (KSU) shared an online course with a group of EFL freshman students enrolled in a similar grammar course at Umm Al-Qura University (UQU). The instructors and their students used Makkah e-Learning www.makkahelearning.net from home as a supplement to in-class grammar instruction. The aim of the study was to investigate the effectiveness of collaborative online instruction on students' attitudes towards online collaborative learning and teaching. The study tried to answer the following questions: (1) What effects did the online collaborative project have on the students' attitudes towards online collaborative learning, and interaction with students from other universities in Saudi Arabia? The impact of collaborative online instruction on EFL freshman students' attitudes was based on the author's daily observations and weekly notes as well as a post-treatment questionnaire administered to her students.

6 PARTICIPANTS

Two groups of students at two Saudi universities participated in the online collaborative project. The first group consisted of 70 freshman students from UQU, in Makkah. They were both male and female. The second group consisted of 40 female students at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), at KSU in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The subjects in both groups were all Saudi and were all native speakers of Arabic. Their median age was 18 years, and the range was 17-19. All the participants had 6 years of EFL instruction in grades 7-12 prior to their admission to college. Their English proficiency level ranged between elementary and upper-intermediate. They

were enrolled in their first grammar course. All the students were studying English in a segregated environment where all of the students and instructors on the women's campus are females and all of the students and instructors on the men's campus are males. Male professors may teach female students through closed circuit T.V. Studentsin both groups had no prior experience in online learning.

The UQU students were taught by Ali Abu-Reesh who owns two Online Course Management Systems: www.abureesh.net and www.makkahelearning.net. He taught several online courses using www.abureesh.net and www.makkahelearning.net. He teaches male students face-to-face and female students through closed-circuit T.V. KSU students were taught by the author who had prior experience teaching EFL courses using Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle and Nicenet. She has taught 15 language courses online including writing, grammar, culture, study skills and ESP to graduate and undergraduate female students.

1. IN-CLASS INSTRUCTION

Before in-class instruction began, Ali Abu-Reesh and the author agreed on the grammatical structures to be covered in class and the textbook to be used. Both groups used Betty Azar's *Understanding and Using English Grammar* (3rd Edition). They covered the same grammatical structures in the textbook: *Parts of speech, prepositions, prepositional phrases, transitive and intransitive verbs, linking verbs, regular and irregular verbs, adverb placement, information, tag, negative and yes-no questions, negatives, regular and irregular plurals, use of the definite and indefinite articles, pronouns, subject-verb agreement, 9 tenses, modals, pronunciation of –ed, -s and -es at the end of verbs and nouns, spelling of –ing, -ed, -es.*

2. ONLINE INSTRUCTION

Ali Abu-Reesh and the author used Makkah e-Learning which is owned by Abu- Reesh. The course tools were already set up by Ali Abu-Reesh. Makkah e-Learning consists of the following tools: online discussion forums (news forums), resources, a calendar, announcements, and personal messaging. Webpages, Powerpoint and Flash presentation, pictures, video clips, questionnaires, tests and exercises can be designed and uploaded. The students can view their grades. Instructors can also obtain website usage statistics for each participant. Both instructors served as course administrators and Ali Abu-Reesh was the designer.

After creating the grammar course, all of the students were given the

course URL and they were asked to register. UQU students accessed the course from home and from the UQU Computer Center, whereas KSU students used their own PC's and internet connection from home, as no internet access was available at their college and no PC's were available in the classroom. Online grammar instruction was used as a supplement to in-class instruction that depended on the textbook.

Prior to online instruction, the author assessed her students' computer literacy skills by a questionnaire. All of the students had a PC at home and could use MS Word and some could use Powerpoint. None of the students had prior experience using online courses and 45% could not even use the internet. A tutorial was given to them for reference. The Makkah eLearning course tools were described and instructions on how to use certain course tools were given. Online instruction was initiated by posting a welcome note and by starting a discussion thread.

Each week, we posted a question or a discussion thread that required the students to use a particular tense or grammatical point in the "News Forums". We added grammar websites related to the grammatical structure discussed in class in the "Resources" section. The grammar websites contained explanations, exercises, a daily grammar lesson, and quizzes. Documents on study skills, Powerpoint and animated Flash presentations were also posted. The students were encouraged to check the grammar links, respond to the questions and threads in the "News Forums" and to add grammar links and write about any topic that is of interest to them.

Throughout the semester, the author served as a facilitator. She provided technical support to her students on using the different tools of Makkah e-Learning and responded to individual students' comments and requests. The author sent public and private messages to encourage her students to register, interact and communicate. She had to look for relevant websites and post them in the "Resources" area. She had to post questions and discussion topic and write model responses. Using the online course was optional. Extra credit was given for using the course.

5. PROJECT OUTCOMES

Despite the encouragement, extra credit given and messages sent to the students individually and as a group, only one student from UQU and 4 students from KSU registered in Makkah e-Learning and there was very little interaction in the discussion forums throughout the semester. Only five messages were posted by the KSU students throughout the semester and no messages were posted by the UQU students. The online collaborative project shared by UQU and KSU students proved to be a total failure. The author's

students were shy, apprehensive and hesitant to register, as they were used to learning in a segregated environment (female students and female instructors only). Some wanted to conceal their identity by registering using a male's name, a nickname, their first name and initials, deleting their e-mails, or using "anonymous" instead of their real names. My students thought that sharing an online course with students from other universities would be like a chat-room, where male and female students chat rather than study. Although I assured them that all course activities were monitored by both instructors and that UQU students were respectful and serious, they did not register. The author encouraged the students to register using their real names and gavethem extra credit that, yet they declined.

In Saudi Arabia, male and female students study in a gender-based environment from first grade through graduate school. Male students are taught by male instructors and female students are taught by female instructors (with the exception of the Collegeof Medicine). Male instructors may teach female students through closed-circuit T.V., but female instructors do not teach male students at all. In addition, they felt that the internet should be used for fun not for credit or as a proper course. As a result, they did not take it seriously. They were passive rather than active learners. They read and checked the websites and posts only. They did not want to be recognized by a male professor and male students and were afraid of making mistakes in public. They were afraid there might be critiques or negative comments. Since the Saudi society is conservative, direct contact between male and female teenagers is unacceptable by many families.

The KSU participants reported that they only work if activities are part of the course mark. Since participation was optional, and no portion of the course grade was allocated to use of the online course, many students were not motivated to participate as they felt it was not mandatory. Although extra credit was given, they did not seem to care. Since students were using the online course from home, I had no control ever what they were doing. The rest of the instructors and students at COLT do not use online courses in language teaching at all. That made them feel at odd. The author was the only one using online instruction. Furthermore, freshman students are used to studying with the same group of students and the same sex throughout junior and senior high schools. Some of their classmates in college were their classmates in high school.

Findings of the present study are inconsistent with findings of another study conducted by Al-Jarf (2006), where Saudi sophomore students (in the fourth semester of college) shared an online writing course with Ukrainian and Russian students using Nicenet. At first, they were inhibited and wanted to

Al-Jarf, R. (2007). Cultural Issues in Online Collaborative Learning in EFL. In Meena singhal and John Liontas (Eds.). Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Research. pp. 77-83.

conceal their identity, but later they could overcome their hesitation and found online learning with Ukrainian and Russian students fun and effective in enhancing their writing skills and cultural awareness. Students in the Al-Jarf's (2006) study had prior experience using online courses with Blackboard, when they took a writing course with the author in their first semester of college.

6 CONCLUSION

Online instruction in EFL is not widely used in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, sharing an online course by two groups of freshman students at two Saudi universities was found to be ineffective and unsuccessful. The interaction between the two groups was almost lacking. The students reported that they were inhibited by and unfamiliar with online instruction. They had negative attitudes towards collaboration with students from another university.

For online collaborative instruction to be effective, an instructor teaching freshman student in a gender-based environment should proceed gradually. First, freshman students in the same class may be exposed to online instruction. Second, students of different college levels at the same college enrolled in courses focusing on the same skill such as reading or writing may connect to the Internet from home and share the same online course together with their instructors. When the students are more confident using online courses, have more experience with college courses, they may be connected with students at other universities within Saudi Arabia or abroad. Finally, online collaborative projects could become more effective in enhancing students' attitudes and skills if discussion threads are brainstormed in class, before and after posting messages. To help students take the online course more seriously, it must be part of the final exam and course credit. Taking the above steps into consideration are believed to help technologically novice and limited English proficient students become willing and more confident in using online courses.

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