

ICT as an Index of Transparency in a Saudi EFL Classroom

Dr. El-Sadig Ezza*

University of Khartoum, Sudan

Dr. Khaled Almudibry**

Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Transparency is conceived as the process of (timely) delivery of information (Vught & Heijden, 2010) such that the lack of information is understood to be a clear symptom of bias, corruption and incompetence (Smith, 2004). Thus, transparency is fully expressed when there is lack of hidden agendas. In educational settings, *transparency* consists, *inter alia*, in the declaration and measurement of learning outcomes in a way that is understandable to the students so that they can have an end-to-end view of the relevant educational program (Offerman, 2008). Given these approaches to *transparency*, this paper examines the effect of ICT affordances on the enhancement of educational *transparency* in Saudi EFL classroom. In that connection, there are two research questions to answer: 1. To what extent does ICT literacy among the students impact EFL faculty's role in the classroom? 2. Do different aspects of the educational process trigger the same degree of transparency among EFL faculty? A questionnaire was constructed and distributed to 61 EFL faculty in a number of Saudi Universities to collect needed data. Overall, results revealed a high degree of transparency among the participants, who also practised more transparency in teaching than in academic communication with the students.

Keywords: transparency, EFL teaching, academic communication, openness, ICT

Introduction

Ever since educational technology was introduced into the Saudi academia in the first decade of the 21st century, it has been (positively) affecting the teaching and learning processes in a variety of ways. For instance, Abdalla (2007) reports that as a result of the use of the smart board at Majmaah Community College, the students, taken by this new prodigy, stopped complaining about the extension of classes into their class breaks and that a precious time that was once wasted on silencing the students was fully used in covering course items. In addition, Alebaikan (2011) informs that male professors, who are not allowed to be physically present to teach in female campuses, can do so through a variety of educational technology applications. Most importantly, customer satisfaction surveys administered to students each term have been producing positive feedback regarding teachers' performance. The main impetus for the students' satisfaction is given by the availability of courseware that teachers post on their web-pages and the possibility to communicate with teachers anytime by the email or cell phones. Along these same lines, this paper assumes that the introduction of the ICT into education has far reaching consequences for the degree of transparency in the classroom. Support for this assumption comes partially from the view that teachers who were once considered educational authorities have recently assumed more moderate roles as facilitators as a result of the incorporation of ICT into the educational system. Other things being equal, this shift in teachers' role is given impetus by the fact that "a great deal of our students' learning takes place without our intention or sometimes even despite it" (Dowling, 2003). Such a learning possibility is caused by the fact that students are conceived in the relevant literature as "*digital natives*", implying that they can be more digitally literate and, thus, more knowledgeable about the rich online educational resources than their teachers (Prensky, 2001).

**E-mail: [elsadigezza](mailto:elsadigezza@uofk.edu.sd), Address: University of Khartoum, Sudan

**E-mail: k.almudibry@mu.edu.sa, Tel.: +966164041606, Address: Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia

Yet, it is only in a transparent educational environment that such digital competence can be integrated into classroom activities. Now given these facts about the role that ICT plays in the classroom, this paper attempts to provide answers to the following questions:

- i. To what extent does ICT literacy among Saudi students impact EFL instructional practices?
- ii. Do different aspects of the educational process trigger the same degree of *transparency* among EFL faculty?

Conceptual Background

Generally speaking, the term *transparency*, being synonymous with "openness", is conceived as the process of (timely) delivery of information (Vught & Heijden, 2010) such that the lack of information is understood to be a clear symptom of bias, corruption and incompetence (Smith, 2004). Thus, "transparency is fully expressed when there is lack of hidden agendas" (Luba & Mahraj, 2013, para. 10).

Also, Oliver (2003, p. X) defines *transparency* paradoxically as "flashpoint at the intersection of public's right to know and the individual's and organization's right to privacy." Yet, it plays a central role in people's lives to the extent that lack of it produces "enough words to fill a dictionary", including "..., spin, dishonesty, cover-ups, manipulation, deception, fraud, ruses, trickery, ..., duplicity, cheating, lying, deceit, cons, corruption and treachery." (p.1)

Educationally speaking, many researchers approach *transparency* from different perspectives. For instance, discussing *transparent institutions*, Adnet et al. (2011: 13) maintain that for an institution to be so conceived, it must adhere to a number of criteria including selection of students who can complete courses based on educational achievement and potential, use of reliable and valid assessment methods and minimizing barriers to applicants. Also, Vught & Heijden (2010, p. 33) relate *transparency* to quality assurance as information delivery medium that aims at helping external stakeholders to "form judgments and take decisions." Further, according Offerman (2008, para. 8), *transparency* is a characteristic of program-level learning outcome. In other words, *transparency* consists in the declaration and measurement of learning outcomes in a way that is understandable to the students so that they can have an "end-to-end view" of the relevant educational program. However, it is stipulated that the program should represent "a conceptual shift from curriculum as a collection of courses to curriculum as a strategic educational map that shows how and when developmental competencies are developed...". These perspectives focus on the aspects of academic *transparency* that relate to "educational administration", "management of financial resources", "recruitment of academic personnel", "admission to educational institutions", etc.

However, as shown in the introduction above, this study addresses a fourth ICT-generated transparency that centres upon the teacher-student relationship both inside and outside of the classroom. It particularly investigates the extent to which the doings, thoughts, interests, concerns of the teacher, etc. are visible to the student (Dalsgaard & Paulsen, 2009). The teacher's role is emphasized owing to the fact that it is the teacher who both facilitates and assesses learning. In that connection, there are two questions that this part attempts to answer: what is transparent teaching and how can it be enhanced by the integration of ICT in the classroom?

To begin with, Evans (2013) theorizes that transparent teaching represents a philosophical shift that requires courage, resolve and belief on the part of the teacher to share course information with the student so as to make the classroom an optimal learning environment for both the teacher and the student. The relevant literature also shows that transparent teaching transcends mere information sharing to the reconsideration of "some fundamental assumptions about course structure, content and instructor's role" (Arvidson & Huston, 2008, p. 4). In other words, these assumptions were once peculiar to the teacher but can now be negotiated with the student in a transparent educational environment. Other practices and activities that render a classroom transparent include teacher's willingness to be candid, adventurous and self-critical (ibid) and engaging with the students, appreciating candid feedback and acknowledging contributions (Chang, 2002). Indeed, teachers should experience such behavioural changes to function properly in a transparent educational environment given the traditional view that "teaching is normally a very a private activity, closed off from our peers by four walls of the classrooms, and also often jealously guarded behind the walls of academic freedom" (Kelly, 2001, para. 7).

Ezza (2012) reports that the teacher who was once considered "an educational authority", "a dispenser of knowledge", etc. has recently assumed more moderate roles as, e.g. a facilitator, an organizer, a guide, etc. owing to the students' familiarity with digital technologies and, hence, rich educational resources accessed through them, among others. There are at least two implications for the teacher that may result from this situation: students' ability to learn outside teachers'

experience, and learning may achieve objectives other than those set by the teacher (Newhouse, 2002, p. 38). As a result, the teacher has two extreme alternatives to choose from: resistance to the integration of ICT in education as it reduces his/her influence or accept to acquire ICT-related skills and literacy to be able to function competently in the classroom. Fortunately, research findings inform that there is a strong tendency among teachers to adopt a more ICT-oriented roles that enable them to form learning communities with own students (Fairman, 2004; Ezza, 2012). It was also concluded that *transparency* gave study participants “a better sense, purpose, motivation, clarity, and connection to course objectives.” (Anderson et al, 2013, p. 38).

Method

Participants

The study participants were 61 EFL faculty who were presumably in the service of eleven Saudi government-owned universities. In fact, the questionnaire was sent to 500 faculty whose email addresses were posted on the e-gates of their respective institutions but only 61 responses were received. Apparently, there were unused/inactive email addresses as indicated by the 20 notices of delivery failure and subsequent apologies from some faculty who had not used their emails for a long time. Since some e-gates did not include emails addresses of their EFL faculty at least at the time of data collection, e.g. Prince Sultan University, Hail University, Jazan University, Northern Border University, etc., they were excluded from this survey. The participants were targeted as a single group, i.e. regardless of their gender, age, academic degree and academic status as the study intends to elicit general information about the degree of their teaching transparency.

Instrument

A five-scale, likert-type questionnaire (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) was constructed to collect data for this study. It comprised 20 statements that centred upon many practices that were assumed to enhance teaching transparency. They roughly fall into two categories: teaching practices and communication practices. The first category formed the backbone of the questionnaire both in terms of the number of statements (80% of the questionnaire) and the variety of teaching strategies included. On the other hand, the communication practices focused on teacher-student communication outside the classroom to reinforce both teaching and learning. The instrument's face validity was verified by ten EFL faculty in a number of Saudi Universities while Cronbach's alpha was used to calculate its reliability, resulting in the co-efficient of .834 and, thus, indicating high consistency.

Procedure

The questionnaire was posted on Google Drive and then forwarded to the email addresses of the participants. In many cases it was sent to their institutional and general addresses when both were available on the e-gates of their institutions for the fear that one of them might be inactive. Yet, as shown in the participants' section above, a number of notices of delivery failure were received. Even worse, only about 13% of the study population completed the questionnaire despite the fact that it had been emailed twice to most of them.

Results

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data to answer the first research questions, i.e. *To what extent does ICT literacy among the students impact EFL faculty's role in the classroom?* Table 1 below informs that the participants' responses were indicative of a high degree of transparency as can be substantiated by the high mean of their responses (which is closer to the maximum value than to the minimum value). This finding will be elaborated further in the discussion section below:

Table 1: *Teaching Transparency among EFL Faculty in Saudi Arabia*

Descriptive Statistics				
Std. Deviation	Mean	Maximum	Minimum	N
8.66114	87.4262	100.00	66.00	61
				61
				Valid N (listwise)

Std= standard; VAR= variable

As to the data required to answer the second research question, it is important to point out in this connection that the questionnaire consisted of 20 statements that were assumed to reflect transparency in two areas: teaching and communication. Thus, the second research question was posed to find out if practices pertaining to these two areas received equal attention from EFL faculty. T-test was used to analyze the difference between the responses in these sections (i.e. statements 1-16 and 17-20 respectively); table 2 below summarizes the finding:

Table 2 *T-test for the Difference in Transparency between Teaching and in Communication means*

One-Sample Statistics						
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		
Transparency in Teaching	61	70.4754	6.76906	.86669		
Transparency in communication	61	16.9508	2.52604	.32343		

One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Transparency in Teaching	81.316	60	.000	70.47541	68.7418	72.2090
Transparency in communication	52.410	60	.000	16.95082	16.3039	17.5978

t= total; df= degree of freedom; sig.= significance; alpha is ≥ 0.05

Discussion

Table 1 indicates that transparent teaching has become a matter of heightened importance for the study participants. There are at least two reasons to explain the tendency to adopt a more open relationship with their students. First, Prensky (2001) argues that the new generations of learners (those who were born after 1983) have grown up amid digital technologies. And given the fact the Internet has become a rich educational resource, it is possible to maintain that they not only access educational materials that could be richer than the textbooks prescribed by the teacher, but also learn over and above the relevant course objective. In such an educational environment, it would be futile to stick to the old roles of "a dispenser of knowledge", "an educational authority", etc. as there are technology-based avenues of knowledge that could be more student-friendly than the traditional classroom where the teacher dominates the educational scene. It is natural, therefore, that teachers react positively to these changes by accommodating their students' digital competence to enrich the classroom activities. This explanation receives a strong support from previous research findings. For instance, Fairman (2004, p. iii) reports that as a result of the introduction of laptop in the educational system in Maine State, "[T]eachers have begun to see themselves as partners in learning with students and report more reciprocal relationship with students". What is more, "students are able to bring new content and information into the classroom ..." (ibid). Second, most Saudi universities urge their faculty to develop their personal web-pages where course materials and contact information are posted. Since this procedure makes the teacher and courseware available to the students whenever need arises, it certainly renders the relevant educational environment transparent.

Regarding the second research question, table 2 shows that there is a significant difference between participants' response to the two sections of the questionnaire: teaching practices (statements 1-16) and academic communication (statements 17-20). Data analysis shows that the participants demonstrated more transparency in the former than in latter despite the fact that they had posted their contact information, e.g. email addresses, mobile phones, etc. on the personal web-pages so as to facilitate communication not only with their students but also with members of academic communities nationally and internationally. There is at least one piece of evidence emanating from data collection procedure that confirms teachers' tendency to favour teaching transparency over communication transparency. It was reported above that there had been many notices of delivery failure resulting from the lack of use of email addresses to the extent

that they were suspended. It is natural, therefore, that assignments could neither be submitted nor received electronically.

Conclusion and Implications

Although educational transparency has been widely investigated, there is a paucity of data regarding its application to the EFL classroom as most studies focused on transparency in academic administration, management of financial resources, recruitment of academic personal, admission to educational institutions, etc. It was only after the integration of ICT in education that teaching transparency has been paid more attention. Relevant research has particularly focused, *inter alia*, on the possibility that learning might take place without teachers' intention or even despite it; thus, it is proposed that educationist should re-examine some dominating assumptions about a number of pedagogical principles and practices including teachers' role in the classroom (Dowling, 2003).

In the light of these developments, the present paper set out to examine the degree of teaching transparency in an educational environment characterized by techno-pedagogy in the Saudi tertiary institutions. Overall, the findings indicated that EFL teachers showed a high degree of transparency but that they demonstrated more transparency in teaching than in academic communication with their students. Each finding has an implication for classroom practitioners and researchers. Where the first finding is concerned, "teaching transparency" does not seem to be an established concept as evidenced by the attempts made to report a working definition of it in (2) above. The available literature provided a little help about what constitutes "teaching transparency" to be employed to construct the data collection instrument for this study. This conclusion can be further substantiated by the fact that an intensive search on major databases such as EBSCO, Sage, etc. using the keywords "transparent teaching", "transparent teacher" and "transparency in EFL/ESL classroom" did not produce the required results. So, were it not for the articles accessed from free websites, this study would not have been completed. Both teachers and classroom researchers are, therefore, strongly recommended to make greater efforts to develop this concept in theory and practice.

The second finding seems to concern teachers. Apparently, the study participants considered communication with their students when they are off campus a matter of secondary importance. Needless to say, the variety of learning management systems adopted by many Saudi tertiary institutions are meant to encourage continued collaboration between faculty and their students as it provides them with opportunities to enrich topics that they initiated in the classroom. Thus, a more positive attitude towards academic communication is required on the part of the EFL teachers to facilitate both teaching and learning.

References

- Anderson, D. A., A. N. Hunt, R. E. Powell & C. B. Dollar (2013). Student's Perceptions of Teaching Transparency. *Journal of Effective Teaching*, 13/2, 38-47.
- Abdalla, S. Y. (2008). The Role of Smart Boards in Enhancing students' Oral Presentations: The case of Al-Majma'ah Community College, King Saud University. *ATEL Journal*, Lebanon, 17, 8-13.
- Alebaikan, R. (2011). A Blended Learning Framework for Saudi Higher Education. A paper Presented at the Second International Conference of E-Learning and Distance Learning, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
- Adnet, N. McCaig, C. & Slack, K (2011). Achieving Transparency, Consistency and Fairness in English Higher Education admission: Progress since Schwartz. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65/1, 12-33.
- Arvidson, P. S. & Huston, T. A. (2008). Transparent Teaching. *Currents in teaching and Learning*, 1/1, 4-16.
- Chang, R. K. C. (2002). *Transparent Teaching* [PowerPoint Slides]. Department of Computing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic. Retrieved August 4, 2013 from <http://www4.comp.polyu.edu.hk/~csrchang/PolyU3.pdf>
- Dalsgaard, C. & Paulsen, M. (2009). Transparency in Cooperative Online Learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10/3. Retrieved October 17, 2012 from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/671/1267>.
- Dowling, C. (2003). *The Role of the Human Teacher in Learning Environments of the Future*. IFIP Working Groups 3.1 and 3.3 Working Conference: ICT and the Teacher of the Future. Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved June 16, 2011 from <http://crpit.com/confpapers/CRPITV23Dowling.pdf>.
- Evans, C. (2013). *How transparent is your classroom?* Retrieved September 12, 2013 from http://www.guide2digitallearning.com/blog_chad_evans/how_transparent_your_classroom

- Ezza, S. Y. (2012). EFL Teacher's Role in ICT-Oriented Classroom: The Case of Majma'ah University. *Proceedings of Imam University Symposium in English Language Teaching in Saudi Arabia*, Riyadh, 31-53.
- Fairman, J. (2004). Trading Roles: Teachers and Students Learn with Technology. (Research Report No. 3). Main Education Policy Research Institute. The University of Maine Office. Retrieved January 20, 2010 from <http://libraries.maine.edu/cre/MEPRIP/MLTIResearchReport3.pdf>
- Kelly, T. M. (2001). Towards Transparency in Teaching: Publishing a Course Portfolio. Retrieved October 1, 2013 from <http://www.historians.org./perspectives.issues/2001/0111/0111not1.cfm>
- Luba, E. W. & Mahraj, M. (2013). Enhancing the Learning Transparency through E-transparency. A paper presented at the International Conference on ICT for Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe. Retrieved October 12, 2013 from http://www.ictforafrica.org/attachments/section/4/ict4africa2013_submission_3.pdf
- Newhouse, P. (2002). The Impact of ICT on Learning and Teaching: Literature Review. Perth: Specialist Educational Services.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9/5, 1-6.
- Offerman, M.J. (2008). Transparency in Learning Outcomes: A refreshing Disruption in Higher in Education. Retrieved April 19, 2010 from www.clomedia.com
- Owner, R. W. (2003). What is Transparency? New York: McGraw Hill.
- Vught, F.A. V. & Heijden, D. F. W (2010). Multi-dimensional Ranking: A New Transparency Tool for Higher Education and Research. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 23/3, 31-56.

Acknowledgement

This is an updated version of Ezza and Al-Mudibry (2014), which originally appeared as a book chapter in L. Burke (ed.), a John Catt Publication. The researchers would like to express their sincere gratitude to John Catt Educational Ltd for their kind permission to republish it in a refereed journal.

About the Authors

Dr. El-Sadig Ezza is an Associate Professor at University of Khartoum (Sudan).

Dr. Khaled Almudibry is an Assistant Professor at Majmaah University (Saudi Arabia)