Culture Responsiveness in a Global Virtual Classroom

The Case of the University of Tlemcen, Algeria

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Abstract—**As traditional lecture styles have become nowadays less desirable and profitable, more and more demands are made on the part of both teachers and learners. One way of helping teachers fulfil their students' 'growing' needs in the age of globalisation is through the introduction of technology in the classroom. The present paper, therefore, intends to exploit the notion of cultural responsiveness in an international online course called 'Global Virtual Class'; henceforth GVC. The project, which falls within the area of cultural education, brings together partners from all the word continents and deals with intercultural issues appropriate to life in the target growing communities. It also focuses on teaching intercultural awareness through observing what people belonging to different cultures say and do. The aim of this paper is twofold; it first explains what a culturally responsive teaching is, then it gives an overview of how cultural issues are taught in GVC, to check at a further step the extent to which the use of the cultural knowledge of students via prior experiences, and performance styles can make learning more appropriate and effective in a GVC setting.**

Index Terms— **Globalisation, culture / cultural responsiveness, virtual class, educational technology.**

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the new millennium and the emergence of the process of globalisation and international commerce, the availability of cheap telephone service and the increase of the use of the internet have contributed in the establishment of more and closer contacts between human societies across the globe. The world we are living in is getting therefore more and more interdependent. The spread of sophisticated technological devices in the field of communication and education has certainly led to the growth of more and more cross-cultural contacts. Hence, heavier and heavier demands are made on the part of foreign language teachers. As EFL teachers at the university level, our students without doubt expect us to teach them things that go beyond comprehension, grammar and orthography. They want us to give them more than plain basics of phonological, morphological and grammatical rules. They would like to be helped to express themselves freely and 'correctly'. Furthermore, they look ahead at communicating a variety of subjects in sport, art, literature, religion, science, economics, and even politics and war dealings. They hence strongly expect us to open up the world for them.

It is worth considering here that not all our students are learning at the university to become language teachers themselves. Noticeably, many of them do learn English particularly to be able to travel and yield a life abroad, to read and make research, to enter into commerce and make new contacts, to communicate and exchange ideas with people of different ages, nationalities, and linguistic affiliations, or simply to understand broadcasted news, shows, and movies. Their motives subsequently surpass the 'traditional' environment they are part of or the family they have been raised in. A reason for which, the new generations' first language and the traditional classroom settings cannot be adequate to cope with their thirst to digitals in the new millennium.

One way of helping EFL teachers fill their students 'growing' needs is through the use of technology in the classroom. Because present-day students' expectations exceed the conventional learning environment which is based on out-dated finalities that are assumed in the traditional textbooks, schedules, and four-wall classroom settings, it is strongly recommended to implement the use of technology in foreign language classes. And so, educational technology becomes not only highly motivational, but also very profitable, as students are intrinsically interested in the world of digitals. Yet a common question that all language teachers are usually confronted with is: where to start from? This paper comes to fit the learners' wants in the age of the net, the dish, the mobile, the laptop, the IPod and many other electronic and digital devices the young and the old, the man and the woman, the clumsy and the cautious find satisfaction when using them. It appears under three important headings in accordance with:

firstly, the nature of culture responsive teaching, secondly, the GVC project and some of its procedures and techniques, and thirdly the explanation of how can a project of this type promote culture responsiveness through pointing out what is specific in this virtual class over conventional ways of teaching, and how can such a project elevate the understanding of culture through the perception of important differences between the home culture and a foreign culture.

II. WHAT IS CULTURE RESPONSIVENESS ABOUT?

Awareness and knowledge of what a culture[1] is made of has been referred to in many anthropological studies as 'cultural competence', a term that is often used interchangeably with 'cultural responsiveness' (Dunbar & Scrymgour, 2009) [2]. For Cross et al (1989) cultural competence has been defined as '…a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations' (Cross, et al 1989:iv) [3]. This detailed and comprehensive definition focuses in addition to the sum of knowledge, skills and values that are required for effective communication and interaction, the kind of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that lay behind 'The ability to work effectively across cultures'. (Lee et al 2007:3) [4].

Someone who is culture or culturally responsive is someone who possesses this cultural awareness that allows him to understand the conduct of the people around him, their ways of living, thinking, and behaving, whether they share with him the same cultural beliefs and values or not. So, it is all about a way of co-existence between individuals wherein tolerance, harmony and acceptance of the other, no matter who he is and how he looks or sounds, are prevailing, and narrow-mindedness, discord and rejection of what is different are absolutely undesirable. The point is that the more you know about your culture and what is different from it in other cultures the more you can understand and tolerate with the owners of these cultures, and so you can broaden your cultural responsiveness to these outsiders. Hence, in order to be responsive to foreign elements of culture one requires first a strong cultural competence that allows him to understand how these elements are embedded and how they function in his own culture and how different they are from counterparts that co-exist in a different culture. At a further step he needs to develop his ability to accept what is apparently not similar to his earlier constructs of culture.

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, while the term culture is viewed here with reference to Whittaker's definition which depicts it as something that **'…consists of beliefs, values, ideas, and ways of behaving that we share with others and that are transmitted through language from one person to another or from generation to another'** (Whittaker 1976: 79) [1], the term culture responsiveness is used in interchangeably with cultural responsiveness to refer to the same process.

In the field of teaching and learning, the process refers to the use of '…the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students'. (Gay, 2000: 29) [5]. The idea is that, with the process of globalisation and with the integration of learners bearing different communal and cultural backgrounds in the same university hall, a student is very often confronted with classmates with different cultural heritages, and he still has to cope with all these differences by, not only understanding the linguistic behaviour and the bon-linguistic behaviour of those who subscribe to a different culture, but also accepting all what seemingly does not fit the norms and the values, he has earlier in his life developed loyalties to inside the family or the culture he has grown up in. Success in learning and in teaching alike becomes in this way much dependent on how aware a learner or a teacher is about the culture he possesses and the cultures the others around him affiliate to, and how responsive he is to all what is odd, awkward, and inappropriate to the long-established and cherished values. So, the whole process is about bridging the gap between one's culture and other cultures in a way that allows learners to become successfully socialised with their equals who hold different nationalities and cultures. According to the Services and Supports Section in the Department of Developmental Services, United States of America[2], there are many benefits in being culturally responsive. It helps learners and teachers alike develop abilities to foster more understanding of a given person and how this person operates, feels, and behaves. It also helps them effectively communicate culturally sensitive choices and their consequences, and develop an awareness of similarities and differences between cultures and the existence of different ways of responding appropriately in a heterogeneous group. (Ibid., p2)

Culturally responsive teachers show a genuine interest not only in their learners' academic needs, but even in their social and emotional well-being (Gay, 2000). Generally, positive and authentic relationships between students and teachers are associated with the absence of behaviour problems and with the presence of emotional care and supportive feedback from the part of the teacher. Negative and fake relationships, instead are the outcome of misunderstandings due to behaviour problems that may engender a kind of pressure on the part of both learners and teachers. Being responsive excludes all what is negative and destructive and welcomes in return all what makes of the classroom learning environment more positive and productive. McNeely (2002) has assigned a list of indicators of a teacher who is described as culturally responsive in terms of the kind of relationship he develops with his learners. Some of these indicators are displayed here with reference to (Perso, 2012: 35) [6]:

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[2] For more details refer to the report of the Services and Supports Section in the Department of Developmental Services, United States of America available on www.dds.ca.gov/.../docs/Culturally_Responsive.pdf

- He displays substantial evidence of warmth, caring, and trust; holds evidence of positive attention directed towards the student. e.g., recognising special talents, encouragement during lessons, and the provision of emotional support;
- He encourages positive interactions and instances of interest and participation in the student's activities and personal life;
- and he listens effectively to the student rather than just reacts to overt behaviour. (ibid.)

A culturally responsive teacher is, in addition to what is stated above, someone who:

- has a thoughtful vision about his learners and their group membership, tries to reach out and understand differences and maintains at the same time positive and constructive views of these differences;
- is a good communicator who uses credibility, loyalty and assertiveness without judging or underestimating the others, and makes efforts to recognise cultural diversity;
- and develops sensitivities to students' cultural and situational messages in a way that establishes more understanding. (ibid.)

III. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Whatever the angle of vision, any study of language interactions in some particular contexts, is in essence rooted in the interdependencies laying between language and culture as they are both two interdependent and interrelated phenomena, to the extent that we cannot talk about one of both without entailing the other. Basically, the general analysis of linguistic behaviour or language use within a given community helps bridge the gap between descriptions of language elements in terms of linguistic structure and discourse and descriptions of culture elements in terms of social structure, religion, personality and the like.

Our purpose in this research through the application of unstructured ethnographic[3] observational techniques is to explore what goes on in this kind of virtual course, namely GVC and find out how the participants involved in these learning circumstances to how people use language in their interactions, wherein the method of study is a sort of controlled induction through the use of a limited number of topics that relate to general social and cultural life. This course, which is based on a global understanding of the cultural, the economic, and the political loads of the participating countries, comprises a number of interesting topics among which are the following:

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[3] The ethnographic account tries to describe how a particular group of people can be kept together as they all share the same culture and affinities, and how they can be all united though they are still different from one to another.

College Life, Work and Holidays, Cultural Traditions and Family, Meaning of Life and Religion, Stereotypes and Prejudices.

The activities involved in this course deal with the four language skills (listening; speaking, reading, and writing). Some of them may need research before and or after the connections. Arrangements can be done inside the computer laboratory or in an ordinary library. Students and faculty partners are usually formed before the course and are substantially engaged in electronic contact throughout the course time and even after. Real-time video conferencing, net chatting, and electronic mailing allow partners from different geographical and cultural areas to share communal and individual experiences. This unfamiliar teaching situation is truly exciting for learners who seek innovation and originality.

IV. PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES

Basically, a virtual classroom is a computerised setting which enables contact between two or more groups of learners. Such a contact is attained by means of the internet. Both teachers and students who are from different places can be connected to exchange knowledge. To achieve this task, a variety of activities can be involved like video conferencing, group discussion, and live chat sessions. The GVC project, which is basically a an online learning setting, comprises connections made between East Carolina University in the United States of America, Algeria and other universities from many parts of the world. It includes a whole range of free, online educational activities and resources. Three innovative and highly motivational skills are aimed at throughout this course. It helps students overcome language barriers and cultural differences, encourages team work and peer correction, and enables students to navigate the web and explore it, interact and communicate, examine what they read on the internet and involve in research.

This virtual teaching course, which is basically about culture, is held by a lead teacher or two lead teachers and a group of fourteen students from any department in Tlemcen University and a similar number of students from the overseas university they connect and share knowledge and experiences with. Students usually work in pairs. A reason for which, the two groups are divided into sub groups of seven learners who are supposed to share tasks and switch roles within the period allotted for connection. The time required for such a class includes a fourteen or sixteen week semester with frequent links on Monday and Wednesday. Three or four weeks of two or three connections of one hundred and fifty (150) minutes a week are required per culture, so that three lectures of forty five (45) or two lectures of seventy five (75) minutes are made available in a week time. The schedule, which is based on a global understanding of the cultural, economic, and political loads of the participating countries, comprises a number of interesting topics. Some of these have already been introduced in the above section.

The research was undertaken in the university of Tlemcen in a multimedia classroom wherein enough computers are

available to perform tasks in, and IP regular Internet connectivity is made at a high speed for the sake of all the participating students in this project. Both teachers and learners require a certain amount of technical training that varies from being able to make a simple click with a mouse to manipulating a computer and surfing in the web without restraint and without the assistance of the laboratory technician. The degree of technical training students need in these suggested activities varies in accordance with the different tasks they have to carry out on the net. Basically, they should be able to switch on a computer, click on an icon to start a browser, and scroll around a web page. They should also recognise how to send messages from an electronic box and how to chat via Skype or any other suitable programme or social network. Teachers, on the other side, certainly need more than that to make learners work effectively in these virtual classes. They should be able to navigate the Web and to use it to interact and communicate decently. There may be times where the connection can be very slow and disrupting, in this condition, the lab technician may be of great help to both learners and teachers. GVC makes some heavy demands on the part of lead teachers. They need, for example, to be well prepared to teach and to adapt their teaching to uncontrollable variables. Checking out the connection and the web sites is necessary before starting a class, as some web pages are regularly changing in terms of content, while others are perpetually deleted. They also need to look with a critical eye on the kind of data they are going to provide their learners with. They have to make students develop critical awareness too. More than that, they should be patient, as there are times when the web can run very slowly, and times when no electric current can be supplied to work with.

Three sorts of activities drawn from the introduction of computers in classroom settings are held in this type of tutoring. These are web surfing, text conferencing, and electronic mailing.

A. Web Surfing:

The World Wide Web provides access to a huge number of images, sounds and files which can provide a context for the topics studied. Images include photographs, paintings, and scientific illustrations proper to a particular topic. Audio-visual resources might include songs, music, writers reading their own works, or even sequences from movies and documentaries. These resources make additional interactive materials to increase the understanding of textual data. Actually, texts, images, and sound files are not what lack in the web. They come under different forms and from various sources. Moreover, when surfing in the internet, learners do read the instructions or the information they are in front of willingly and carefully to understand them and to respond appropriately. In an ordinary classroom, teachers very often throw up their hands in dismay, because their students usually disregard instructions on the board or on textbooks. And even if they read and comprehend them, they pretend not understanding, either because of their reliance on the available teacher to explain what the words mean, and what he expects from them, or simply because of lack of motivation or concentration,but in front of a computer, a student must rely on his own knowledge and skills.

B. Video Conferencing:

Video conferencing allows the students to listen to spontaneous native speech delivery, and makes them respond in an unplanned way. Learning situations of this type are really scarce in an ordinary foreign language classroom. They improve the listening and the speaking of introverts and extroverts alike. They also make students develop their communicative competence and share affinities with users of English from different parts of the world. During class, learners are to give questions about the cultural loads of their partners and to explain things about their own culture. This task is most of the time achieved via responding verbally during discussion. They are therefore invited to behave by their own and on the immediacy. Such an activity gives EFL students much needed practice in listening and speaking. Furthermore, it helps learners overcome difficulties in expressing personal ideas and views of various topics, as there is less pressure in such a learner-centred situation.

C. Text Conferencing:

Text conferencing or chatting can go beyond a face to face interaction under the form of electronic or virtual course, wherein two or more groups of learners from different universities are to exchange information and ideas through group discussions. Several topics can be handled, and this unfamiliar teaching experience can be truly exciting for learners who seek innovation and originality. Text conferencing can also be done before, during, and after the programmed links. Far from the pressure of his teacher, a student in front of a person of his age feels more secure to write about his worries and to make revelations. He does not have to sit and think for a long time about what he should or might like to say. He has rather to respond very spontaneously. Shy students can certainly be effectively involved in this activity which is really telling in changing learners' behaviours and attitudes.

D. Electronic Mails:

Electronic mails, which are an alternate version of the old pen-pal mailing, are a very successful and motivating communicative exercise. The learner writes a message on his or her computer and sends it via a modem to another person in any English speech community. He can subsequently develop his potential writing and promote his reading abilities. Electronic mails are very advantageous, since they present a good tool to prepare learners for the production of short and simple messages in form and style. They are also highly motivating as learners feel more secure when they write by themselves, and they are not frustrated by the stance of a teacher at their feet. Peer correction may add more profit to this writing activity.

Web surfing, video conferencing, text conferencing and e-mailing all contribute in creating an interactive learning

environment. Web navigation and research makes in GVC a learner-content interaction possible wherein verbal and non-verbal communication is provided, so that both individualistic learning and cooperative learning are enhanced in a highly motivational environment. In front of a computer, students do make their own learning by themselves. They are thus oriented to a learner-centred teaching. Besides, they have fun, and they satisfy their sense of curiosity towards the gifts of technology. Exploring the net in language teaching is not only extremely motivational as students are intrinsically interested in the world of digitals, but it is also very profitable. Group collaboration is also significant in GVC settings. Students all together and from both sides learn how to work and succeed as a team. There are times where the lead teacher is not available, students in this case turn to each other to raise and clarify a point. Besides, they usually gather after and between classes to share informally their learning experiences through exposing their partners' messages and their own findings or conclusions about some subject matters.

The participants involved in this study are first, second, and third year students. They have varying linguistic competences, but they are still, more or less, good students of English. They are aged between eighteen and twenty-four, and following an ethnographic account, we assume they are all sharing, more or less, the same culture as they are all Algerians, and they were all born and raised up here in Algeria.

V. RESULTS: HOW DOES GVC PROMOTE CULTURE RESPONSIVENESS?

Educational technology, as it is illustrated through the case of this virtual class, has several advantages over the traditional tutoring models. Yet, the procedures and the topics involved in GVC usually pose a challenge to lead teachers from both parts. It is worth noting here that the objective of this virtual classroom is first of all to make overseas students learn culture by extrapolating meaning through observing what people do and say. Students therefore gain knowledge of the requirements of the culture with which they are in contact with, and acquire values and behaviours that are typical to that culture. The course also helps students improve their linguistic competence in terms of language usage and language use.

GVC, therefore, offers a learning experience that makes students more visual, self-directed, self-motivated, assertive, persistent, and problem solvers. There may be times where things do not always go as expected, and teachers cannot be there for an immediate assistance, so students are to take decisions and react according to their own talents. In an on-line course of this type, a lead teacher assumes the role of a facilitator for getting knowledge and not as a dispenser of information and instructions. Furthermore, learners can meet in the laboratory either to work individually or in pairs and small groups. They can share tasks, so as one student might be working on the web, by the time his mate is taking notes, or there may be one student who writes a message, while the other dictates to him. Hence, the benefits of such a virtual class are not only at the individual level but also at the level of the group.

However, there are some problems which are encountered as far as language is concerned. Not all the students are very fluent speakers of English which is the medium of interaction in such a virtual class, and their unfamiliarity with unfamiliar words and idiomatic expressions, for instance, usually leads to misunderstandings. In addition to the expected classical problems of language mastery, others are encountered essentially because of cultural and religious differences.

As far as the Algerian students are concerned, though they do all share nearly the same culture values, they do not all respond in the same way during interaction. The point is that, some of them seem to be unresponsive and disruptive, not because their expectations for communication and interaction are different from their mates' from overseas universities, but simply because the kind of language they use for everyday interactions differs from the one approved in GVC settings, and they have some difficulties to express themselves freely. These are precisely because the English language has culturally loaded linguistic terms and collocations that our students are not always familiar with in Arabic. Individual differences in expression and communication constitute another source of misinterpretation. Students in addition generally learn things in different ways and do not have the same learning preferences. While some learners emphasise listening over speaking because they believe that listening entails understanding, others think that knowledge comes through sharing ideas and active communication. Other differences in response among the Algerian students are sometimes due to religious and cross-cultural variations.

Yet, language problems are not our concern here, since focus is rather given to those cultural differences that can have an impact on how learners use language and formulate ideas and on how responsive or disruptive they are to the foreign culture. It is worth noting here that the intrinsic cultural distinctions that are meaningful to members of a particular community may not be similar to other categories that are not always aware of. If we are to compare Algeria with USA, as a case in point, though the two societies do share universal core beliefs, worldviews, values, and practices, there are still divergent values and norms due to differences in ways and standards of living, customs and rituals and values and beliefs. It is only through contact and interaction that people become more aware of how different the culture they live in is in comparison with the cultures of the other people. In view of that, differences in responding during interaction appear to be related both to individual differences and to the realm of culture. Yet, focus in this paper is on cross-cultural differences between Algerian and American students which sometimes cause tremendous misunderstandings. Some of these differences are summarised, in view of the attitudes that influence how students think and behave, in the following points:

- In the Algerian culture the norm is to be indirect to make the others feel more comfortable and appreciate what you say. Direct communication may be offensive to people. The western culture, namely the American culture, emphasises directness and confrontation. People say exactly what they mean and are all the time

honest even if this hurts someone's feelings or makes him uncomfortable.

- Questioning an adult in the Algerian culture is a sign of poor upbringing and lack of respect. Western cultures instead believe that questioning an adult is a sign of critical thinking, and so they encourage their children to make more queries about things they do not understand.
- For the Algerian students and teachers making exceptions to rules and deriving from the norms is very common. For Americans rules or principles should be applied to everyone without exception.
- The Algerian culture is less aware of time, and it is always possible to change a deadline or schedule if something comes up without much worries and melancholy. In an American culture, it is important to think about how much time a person may have, and punctuality is so indispensable.
- In an external control culture, like the Algerian one, a person cannot control what happens to him. Every person has some limits, and it is not possible to go beyond those limits. It is fate and luck which cause success and failure. In an internal control culture, like the American one, it is believed that people can control what happens to them. There are no limits to what they do and what they can become.
- The Algerian culture assumes that people are not equal, and relationships between teachers and learners are very formal. In an American culture instead, people who have more power or influences try to minimise them. Relationships between teachers and learners are casual and friendly, a reason for which students express their ideas openly and have more responsibility for solving problems.

Yet, there are still some problems encountered in this teaching experience as far as interaction and communication are concerned. Most of these attested difficulties have been explained in this paper with reference to cross-cultural differences. Understanding and accepting cultural attitudes about things like time and responsibility are not very obvious to students who have a modest knowledge of how cultural loads shape ways of thinking and behaving. Besides, Algerians, in comparison with their mates from the United States, are not very often confronted with this problem of ethnic diversity in our schools and universities. It is true that there are some students who are more aware of these aforementioned cultural differences than others, but these are very few, and this makes it very difficult to share one's own culture with others because people of the same group membership usually do not think much about it in any significant way, unless they feel the need to do so, when a foreigner comes, for instance, to join a group either for work or study or for some other reasons.

Furthermore, people usually tend to take their own culture for granted. It is only when they are faced with a different culture that they start to think critically about what they have always believed in and accepted as the norm. It is important to learn about others' cultures not only to understand what they believe in and how they would behave in some circumstances, but most importantly to understand the meanings behind cultural norms and values. This would enable students to share what they have perceived from ideal and real facts and from their own experiences in life. A good understanding of language and cultural differences can help students overcome difficulties to express ideas and meanings of aspects of culture. Nonetheless, what is really innovative in GVC, in comparison with ordinary classes, is that it makes students not only gain an insight into the foreign culture through debate and discussion, but also helps them become culturally responsive and construct positive attitudes and new loyalties towards the various cultural components they come across during the connections. In addition to these constructs, students usually find themselves obliged to stretch their minds and think critically to generate various cultural meanings to every word or sign transmitted during the video conference or when chatting. What they usually communicate is more than mere facts, because there are innumerable things that belong to the realm of culture they newly and unexpectedly discover. The idea is that individuals, no matter how close and alike they are, do not perceive realities in the same way. Consequently, the different topics Algerian students and overseas learners talk, read, and write about are most of the time not treated equally. While some of them may be dealt with too narrowly, others may gain more time and consideration.

VI. CONCLUSION

Educational technology has been introduced to language teaching for years, but teachers' experience in online education in Algeria is very limited. They still feel frustrated in front of the innumerable benefits educational technology has brought in the field. Why do most teachers think of online education as tiring and weighing on? Is it a question of compatibility with programmes and course designs, or is it a matter of electronic illiteracies? It is time to change habits in our classroom settings. GVC is only one instance of virtual teaching models, but we should work on similar projects that would enable the Algerian universities to cooperate and coordinate in a prolific way, especially in the departments of foreign languages, wherein a high deficiency in experienced and skilful teachers is noted. It is time to hold all the opportunities the internet is bringing to classroom settings. Self access, remedial work, and coordination can help teachers overcome their 'phobia' towards the challenges of online education.

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