

The Role of Blended Modality in Enhancing Active Learning Strategies in Higher Education: A Case Study of a Hybrid Course of Oral Production and Listening of French

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Abstract—Learning oral skills in an Arabic speaking environment is challenging. A blended course (material, activities, and individual/ group work tasks ...) was implemented in a module of level B1 for undergraduate students of French as a foreign language in order to increase their opportunities to practice listening and speaking skills. This research investigates the influence of this modality on enhancing active learning and examines the effectiveness of provided strategies. Moreover, it aims at discovering how it allows teacher to flip the traditional classroom and create a learner-centered framework. Which approaches were integrated to motivate students and urge them to search, analyze, criticize, create and accomplish projects? What was the perception of students? This paper is based on the qualitative findings of a questionnaire and a focus group interview with learners. Despite the doubled time and effort both “teacher” and “student” needed, results revealed that the NTIC allowed a shift into a learning paradigm where learners were the “chiefs” of the process. Tasks and collaborative projects required higher intellectual capacities from them. Learners appreciated this experience and developed new life-long learning competencies at many levels: social, affective, ethical and cognitive. To conclude, they defined themselves as motivated young researchers, motivators and critical thinkers.

Keywords—Active learning, critical thinking, inverted classroom, learning paradigm, problem-based.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN Palestine, universities promote the integration of ICT. An-Najah National University is a leading university that aims at enhancing the quality of education on many levels. Using new technology is an adopted tool by the E-Learning Center, at An-Najah National University in Nablus, to create an educational environment including blended learning, recorded lectures, and many others that facilitate the use of various smart learning methods.

The purpose of this study is to find out how the blended learning modality enhances the active learning of students in a course of oral comprehension and expression of French language. It sought simultaneously to discover the role played by the technology and social media in this experience.

It is a course of listening and oral expression skills of French as a foreign language (FFL). This is an obligatory course for Arab Palestinian students having already obtained

the A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level of FFL; it combines face-to-face classes and the online designed material. Learners had to take responsibility of what is designed online using Moodle as a principal platform with the company of other communication and collaboration tools like Trello, Padlet and Facebook [1]. These online implements aimed at flipping the teaching process into a learning one [2], [3].

First, it was primordial to plan well the online material. The Hybrid model allowed a flipping of classroom which is an “instructional strategy”, that helps teachers limit “direct” lecturing in class and thus enhance the “one-to-one interaction” [4]. In the concerned course, this method is supported by a socio-constructivist approach, where learning is viewed as the cognitive construction that allows learner to develop contacts with the surrounding environment, create interactions with the real world, and thus conceive knowledge [5].

The learner, depending on his mental activity, constructs knowledge. It is built up through thinking of his own experience [6]. Activities provided online to students contain various interactive language tasks permitting “participants to have opportunities to learn from their own and each other’s experiences, being actively and personally engaged in the process” [7].

II. CONTEXT

French Oral Skills 2 (listening and Expression) is an obligatory course for Second year students of French B.A. in the French department at An-Najah National University (Fig. 1). It is a blended course using Moodle as the main pedagogical platform. In addition, students used a group page on Facebook, Padlet, and Trello.

On Moodle, various authentic resources for the language were provided with clear instructions. Students had to accomplish thoroughly the objectives of each week. Their job was to discover themes and subjects proposed online before coming to class and discuss the result of their work. The teacher’s talk time was reduced allowing more learning conversations [8]. For certain topics, students had to work together in small groups, share tasks and organize their teamwork according to time. Integrating ICT intended to empower learners with the needed tools to be main actors and

authors of their own learning [9]. This system depended on a differentiated pedagogy, letting students work with a self-

paced rhythm and individualized paths of learning [10].



Fig. 1 Home page of the course on Moodle

III. METHODS

The study is based on a qualitative methodology to collect data, the researcher used a semi directed questionnaire, a focus group interview with learners who went through this experience in the first semester 2016- 2017. This method is selected since it allows a flexibility in the process and in the choice of instruments that must be adapted according to the situation and the research. Consequently, the researcher achieves a better understanding of the experience of the study subjects [11].

Content analysis of the verbal and interactive group communication of participants is used. This analysis allows the researcher not only to analyze the elements declared by students, but it also makes it possible to analyze what is not said and hidden between the lines [12].

A survey was conducted online, using Google Forms. Fourteen out of 15 learners had participated and answered the questionnaire. The same individuals joined the focus group. Data, collected from the focus group, included the audio of the participants and written notes taken by the researcher who moderated the interview [13].

The questionnaire examined these principal elements to discover students' perspective of the employed strategies and their involvement in the learning process:

1. Student commitment all through the course; their motivation and interest; faced challenges and difficulties; and their critics.
2. Communication and interaction between learners themselves, and between the learners and their teacher.
3. Evolution of their role and effectiveness of the blended modality?

Through the focus group, the researcher looked for the keywords expressed by the participating learners while they answer a central question about their new experience of learning French via the online course next to the face-to-face sessions. Both instruments were conducted in their own language, Arabic. Using their mother tongue facilitates their expression of thoughts and point of view illuminating any lingual obstacle that may appear using English or French.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results revealed four main findings, taking in consideration the three principal axes we focused on in our quest.

Regarding the first axe is the **student's commitment all through the course; their motivation and interest; faced challenges and difficulties; their critics**, more than 90% of students pointed out that they were frequently committed to view, listen and follow up what is requested from them online (Fig. 2).

The students confirmed that they would advise other colleagues to take a similar course and pointed out how they became more motivated and responsible for their learning (Fig. 3).

The students also elaborated this point in the focus group, emphasizing how they have been "motivating" at the same time. Reciprocal commitment has been established between the students and their teacher:

"I think in this method when a student has many tasks and things to do and prepare, he becomes a source of motivation for the teacher to give endlessly more in return"... Learner 1.

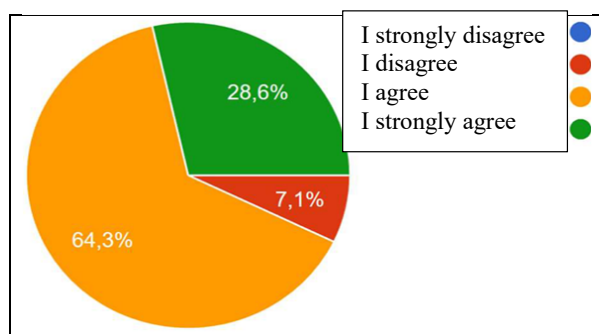


Fig. 2 Commitment of Students

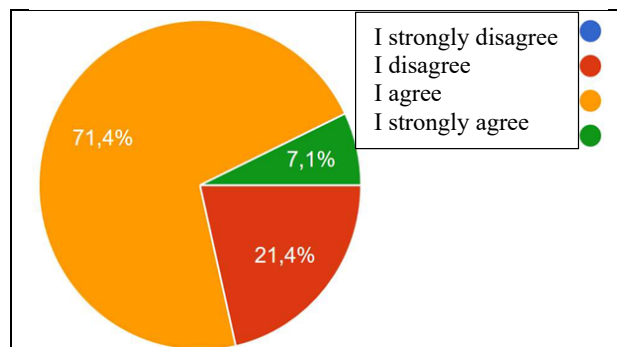


Fig. 3 Motivation of learners

Being involved in this experience, they realized they could achieve more than they would in a traditional lecturing class. Most of the students agreed they learned to organize and manage their learning process and appreciated the individualized and self-paced routine of this course (Fig. 4).

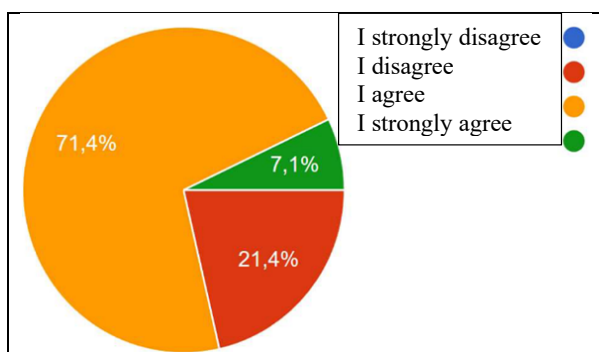


Fig. 4 Better management and organization of learning process

However, only 60% of them would prefer to have all their classes of language in such a method because this would require doubled effort, time, and commitment from them. With five or six courses in a semester, they would be overburdened. Moreover, they do not think that all subjects can be offered in hybrid modality. Besides, learners underlined the importance of the role of their teacher as an advisor and a guide to ensure they got things right.

Concerning the second axe of our research, **Communication and interaction between learners**

themselves and between them and their teacher, participants confirmed the influence of this innovative technique on their communication and interaction since they were always encouraged to work on various projects that demanded interaction with each other, with the society and finally with the teacher (Fig. 5).

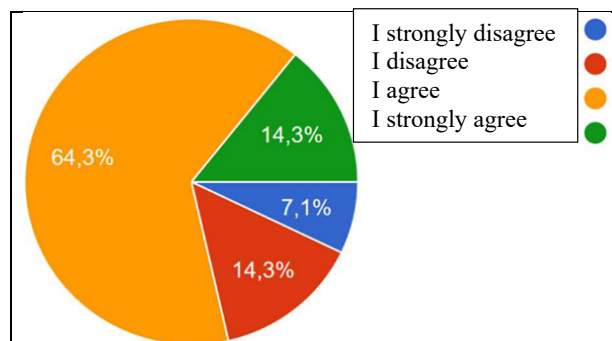


Fig. 5 Communication and Interaction

In the focus group, they added that tools like Facebook, Trello, and Padlet helped them collaborate in distance. They confirmed that they will keep on using the tools of collaboration even after the end of the semester, particularly, the Facebook group. A quick look on the posts of the group, one realizes that they were still using it to communicate and share things concerning the French language learning or strategies of “learning to learn” together. Here is- an example of many- of a participation one month after the end of the semester, knowing that the course ended mid December 2016. One of the students shares a French expression using animals that she learnt by her own, and encourages her colleagues to find out other expressions with animals on Facebook group page of this course, «Comprehension et Expression Orale 2» (Fig. 6).

Aiming to estimate the **effectiveness on their achievement**, the results confirmed that most of them believe their activity has been improved and doubled; they could practice the language more and accomplish concrete language projects. Playing the principal role made them appreciate their autonomy and built up their self-confidence. They became aware of their capacities to discover and establish their learning:

“... in a traditional classroom, we take only what is in the book and what the teacher says. But when we search for something, we like to share it with friends and let them benefit from it: for example if I like a song, I put it on Facebook, and tell them about it using French”.

Learner 2

For them, a flipped classroom increases the opportunities to learn; chances are unlimited. In addition, the quality of learning is better [11]:

“When we look for the information, we learn more, we go further than we’re told to and then we like to share it with colleagues, on Facebook, for example”.

Learner 3

They appreciated the openness provided by the online

designed course and related technical tools:

"We can access resources anytime, we discover information first, and then we come to the class and discuss it with teachers and colleagues." L 4

To summarize this point, the high percentage given to this issue confirms how much they could touch the positive influence of this learning approach supported by ICT on their linguistic achievement; 85% assured that this course made a remarkable improvement on their oral skills (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6 Example of a Facebook post

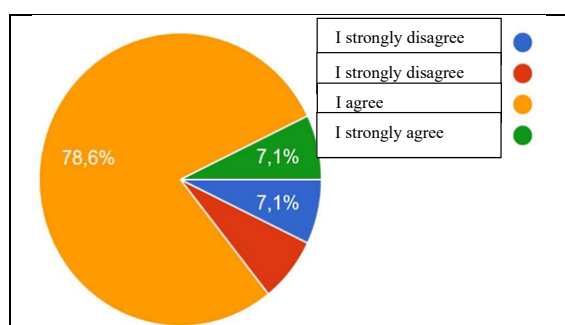


Fig. 7 Remarkable improvement of my oral skills

When it comes to the **role of ICT and Social media in enhancing their active role**, almost 65% of them liked using Moodle to discover documents, accomplish activities, do quizzes and submit assignments. Almost the same percentage of them specified that they prefer the blended model to the

traditional pure face-to-face lecturing (Fig. 8).

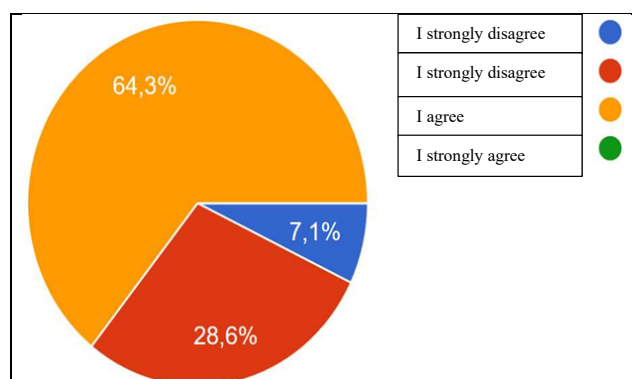


Fig. 8 Preference of using the blended method to the traditional face-to-face

Additionally, they strongly emphasized the overriding role of the pedagogical platform and the social media in their learning experience during the course (Fig. 9).

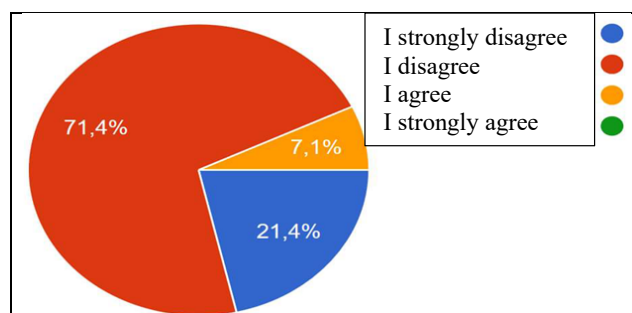


Fig. 9 The marginality of Moodle and social media in their learning experience

To sum up, it is imperative to signalize the frequent keywords participants attributed to themselves during the focus group. They mostly used terms like active, researcher, responsible, sharing, enthusiastic and inspiring. From this list pops up the shift, progressively made, from a teacher-centered paradigm to a learner-centered one [14]. What is obvious is the main change from the paradigm of heteronomy to that of autonomy [15]. The students became the center of the learning process and played the main role to be successful in this challenging innovative experience.

V.CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine the impact of blended learning on involving learners in an inter-active learning environment. In this course of oral skills of FFL, the implementation of this method was to shift from teacher and content-centered paradigm to a highly learner-centered one. The analysis of students' answers to a questionnaire revealed that, in general, students highlighted that they preferred and appreciated the active strategies, enhanced with and implemented within the blended course. They prefer to keep working with this strategy for the classes of French language.

However, they needed always to have the feeling of “security” that the teacher is always there to guide them and to validate the outcomes of their own learning [16].

From the comments and keywords underlined out of the focus group interview with the participants, a remarkable transformation of the educational paradigm from a content and teacher-centered to a learner-centered one is obviously recognized. The learner is responsible of their learning process: he chooses, s/he experiments, s/he decides, s/he searches, s/he collaborates and s/he produces [16], [17]. Students acquired many strategies of learning to learn; they learned to collaborate and work in groups; and they learned to lead their learning.

For students, this innovative education experience of learning oral French skills was very successful and motivating. They are encouraged to repeat it more and more, taking into consideration the well-planned guidance and tutoring. Finally, it is important to study, in future researches, the teachers’ point of view regarding the shift of his/her role; their readiness to use it; their expectations and possibilities to implement it in their courses.

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