DISTANCE LANGUAGE TEACHER & LEARNER AUTONOMY AND MOTIVATION DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN
THE CASE OF MOHAMMED VI POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:
COVID-19 forced the world into a lockdown that made inevitable revisiting patterns of action in all fields, amongst them language education. The shift was sudden for most institutions, educators as well as students. From our institutional experience at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, the degree of success of the teaching/learning experience depended on many factors, among them teacher and learner autonomy and motivation. The purpose of the paper is to highlight the digital transition of the language courses offered by the Language Lab of Mohamed VI Polytechnic University from a teaching perspective as well as the language learner’s perspective. We will explore teacher autonomy and motivation and how that led to a relatively successful distance learning experience. We will also see how student autonomy and motivation facilitated the implementation of distance language courses using the flipped classroom method. The study showed the correlation between the years spent at the university and the levels of autonomy and motivation among students. The period studied is the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic year, mainly from the first weeks of the lockdown. We also evoke the lessons learnt and the challenges that surfaced as we started all-distance language courses for first years and suggest ways to increase teacher/learner independence and motivation in distance language learning.

Keywords: learner autonomy; teacher autonomy; motivation; digital transition; language courses.

Introduction:
The COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the world at its onset; all aspects of life were affected at a global scale. Although language learning had long experienced distance learning, language learners, educators and institutions felt the pinch as most, if not all, had to abandon physical classroom settings and embrace the technology available to them. The challenges that arose were many, and the measures taken varied in efficiency. This study explores the measures taken by the Language Lab of Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P) to maintain the language courses offered as the lockdown was instated. Although the focus was mostly on digitalizing course content and teacher training on how to implement their courses virtually, the most important element was language teacher autonomy and learner motivation. These two elements were compensatory for the issues encountered in other areas such as intermittent loss of connectivity, platform glitches, technical issues during synchronous sessions, etc.

At least seven languages are taught at UM6P, with English and French as the main languages of instruction. These languages are taught through the institution’s Language Lab to all the colleges and research laboratories. The language instruction modes vary depending on the needs of each college and research laboratory. These range from the traditional classroom setting, hybrid teaching, to all distance courses. When the university shifted to all distance courses due to the pandemic, most colleges opted for reduced synchronous classes with the language facilitators, thus implementing the flipped classroom method. For the purpose of this paper, we will not focus on the method itself, but on two of its prerequisites- teacher and learner autonomy and motivation. We will start by defining these terms in the literature.

1. Autonomy in second language acquisition:
1.1. Learner and teacher autonomy

Benson defines autonomy in language learning as “learners’ control over aspects of their learning or, more broadly, learning that takes place outside the context of formal instruction” (2013, p. 840). This definition, albeit an attempt to define the contours of learner autonomy, implies the multidimensionality, variability, and complexity of such a concept. The population studied are undergraduates, graduates and postgraduates. As we will see further in this paper, the degree of autonomy varies among the respondents and even the conception of autonomy itself proves evasive, but we will mainly steer towards what Little (1999) delineates as conscious behavior embracing both form and content of learning. For Little, understanding “what one is learning, why one is learning, how one is learning, and with what degree of success” (p.11) is essential for developing learner autonomy. This aptitude is very closely associated with learner motivation in second language acquisition.

Smith and Erdoğan (2008) define teacher autonomy as ‘the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others’ (p. 83). This definition encompasses skills related to language classroom content elaboration, cognitive, metacognitive and social skills which, together, constitute an autonomous language teacher. Jumani & Malik (2017) identify three forms of teacher autonomy: (1) General Professional Autonomy, (2) Collegial Professional Autonomy and (3) Individual Autonomy. All these forms revolve around the teacher’s scope to make decisions around language teaching. At UM6P, language teachers are handed before the start of most courses, module descriptors, with assessment calendars and are given the freedom to design their own lessons from resources they deem adequate to their student needs and through the technological medium they judge efficient. The university also encourages teacher initiatives such as mentoring student extracurricular activities, which hones this sense of freedom, essential to autonomy.

2. Motivation in second language acquisition:

Motivation in foreign language acquisition is founded on three pillars according to Gardner (1982): (1) effort, i.e., time invested in learning the target language, (2) desire, meaning the drive of the learner to achieve proficiency, and (3) affect, which is the learner’s emotional state while learning the language. At UM6P, there is generally a collective motivation to learn languages. Students’ effort to learn foreign languages generally transcends the hourly volume dedicated to a specific language. Requests for language support classes usually emanate from students, rather than the colleges or laboratories they belong to. Their motivation can be intrinsic, extrinsic or both.

Language teacher motivation is also an area worth exploring. In their review, Hiver et al (2018) describe motivation as a “complex with interconnected personal, relational, experiential, affective and contextual layers. Teachers’ motivations too, like all human motivations, display both stable tendencies and variability.” (p.18). The authors explore extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, and mention “pro-social or altruistic value of teaching” (p.20). Teacher motivation is causally associated with effective L2 acquisition in its larger context:

“Teacher’s motivation is an important concept in every institution, especially in school. If teachers are motivated, their productivity in education process will be in higher processes by influencing directly in teacher’s job effectively with pupils and collaboration with other schools and colleagues”. (Kotherja, 2013, 360)

The motivation for a teacher to enter the profession is then key to the quality of the learning, and the working atmosphere. The affective aspect of language instruction, if well established, can facilitate the latter, even in distance learning as we shall see further.
3. The study:

The data collected for the purpose of this study are administrative data collected by the Language Lab of UM6P over the period from March 20, 2021 (start of the COVID-19 lockdown) to July 15, 2021 (end of the academic year). These include teacher and learner attendance reports, weekly class reports (Virtual class minutes) and teacher evaluation surveys. The purpose is to explore, through various elements, the extent to which the language teachers of the studied semester were autonomous and motivated enough to implement innovative teaching using the technology available to them. Concerning learner autonomy and motivation, a questionnaire, using Microsoft Forms, was sent to all the university students (Year 1 to PhD, including specific vocational programs). The purpose of targeting this vast spectrum of learners is to compare results with several variables in mind: age, duration of studies, specific times of the student journey at the university, long-tern vs immediate language goals etc.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Teacher results:

The administration reports on the studied period focused on the teachers’ use of technology and the design of lessons adapted to this technology. Most synchronous encounters with the students were conducted via the Microsoft Teams platform, on which each teacher was assigned as “owner” of their classes to access the full functionalities of the software (see figure 1 below), versus students who were only members. Teacher autonomy was measured in terms of the teacher’s ability to design lessons that proved student’s engaging. During synchronous sessions, the teacher’s mastery of the technological tool was key to their autonomy in class delivery. Absence of this mastery was compensated for by back-up solutions that were also indicative of teacher’s creativity as any change in the mode of delivery meant adjusting, most of the time, ad-lib, the content of the language class. Technological failures during synchronous classes made the flipped classroom method an imperative since it would allow the students to spend the majority of their time working on the material designed in a way that made the shorter synchronous sessions a sort of “consultation” with the teacher. But this method required a high level of autonomy and motivation among the students. As we have seen, teacher autonomy and motivation are conducive to student motivation and autonomy. Therefore, courses with the highest satisfaction rates were led by teachers who made intuitive decisions during the distance learning phase of the studies semester, and most of them had been creative, pro-social and collegial even before the lockdown and the transition towards distance learning. These were motivated to connect with their students, while less “autonomous” language teachers were reluctant to engage in synchronous class encounters since they expected constraints more than learning opportunities.

Technology failures were recorded mostly among the teachers who were “unmotivated” to teach synchronously. Even when provided IT assistance, they would still opt for asynchronous back-up platforms (see table 1 below). These instances of “lack of motivation” correlated with the age of the teachers. The higher the age, the fewer synchronous sessions, with the exception of Spanish which scored high in student satisfaction and responded positively to IT assistance. We related student satisfaction with teacher performance and student satisfaction of their language acquisition progress. We also noticed that student attendance was high where the overall satisfaction is high. The highest score was Italian and Spanish for the reasons mentioned above, while the lowest was Arabic. The reasons for the low score were the teacher’s reluctance to technology for language teaching and his resorting to basic, informal back-up tools, such as messaging applications.
4.2. Student results:

The number of students who responded to the questionnaire (106) was representative of all the academic levels at the university (Fig. 1 below), with the highest number of responses at entry years (freshman and master’s year 1). The number becomes drastically low as the student spends more time at the university. The motivation to respond to the questionnaire can be related to the motivation to learn the target language or the student’s high expectation as they are in a discovery phase. The lowest rate was among PhD students, but that was mainly due to an email issue that was solved only later when the data had to be extracted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Synchronous (%)</th>
<th>Asynchronous (%)</th>
<th>Main platform</th>
<th>Back-up platform</th>
<th>Average teacher age</th>
<th>Overall Student satisfaction with online language learning during COVID (scale of 1 to 10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>MS Teams, Moodle</td>
<td>Zoom, email, messaging app</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>MS Teams, Moodle</td>
<td>Email, messaging app</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>MS Teams</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>MS Teams</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>60+</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>MS Teams</td>
<td>Email, messaging app</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Respondents by academic level

The lower participation rate meant that the students increased their learning strategies, or prioritized core subjects over language. Students enrolled in long-term studies also recorded low participation, surely due to the feeling that they have sufficient time to learn their target language(s).

When asked what motivates them to learn their target language (56 percent English), most responses mentioned communication (academic, professional and personal) as the main reason, followed by English being the language of research and job opportunities and only one focused
on the prosodic effect of the language. This motivation is reflected in the degree of autonomy among the language learners. Only 12% believe they are not autonomous learners and that they require the tutorship of a professional. These results are in concordance with the response to the open-ended question about the students’ learning strategies. The majority revealed a high level of metacognitive capacity in approaching their target language. Most of them favored implicit learning through immersion programs, content integrated learning, talks, debates, and projects, rather than explicit learning even at lower levels. A few respondents mentioned learning about the culture of the target language as an effective strategy and source of motivation.

This implies a high level of autonomy among language learners, as figure 2 illustrates below. 29 percent of participants rated their level of independence in language learning between 8 and 10. Those who believe they are not autonomous represent a little above 19 percent, with the majority (52 percent) scoring between 5 and 7, which means that even if they see themselves as independent learners, they will still need a professional in their language acquisition, and this is consolidated by the results of the question related to the student’s need of a language facilitator. The question covered various learning combinations (Fig. 3), and 72 percent of the students stated that they will learn best with a teacher and in a group. This is very representative of the elements inherent to language learning as this combines interaction with peers and the guidance of the language course facilitator, while a little over 20 percent prefer one-on-one language classes. These are mostly language learners whose goal is to learn field specific language and avoid being in a classroom with general language that would hinder their progress. While about a tenth see themselves in no need for a language course facilitator, the rest of the participants see it important that they learn in the presence of one.
The average satisfaction with distance language courses during the COVID-19 lockdown, whether for international students who stayed on campus or nationals who stayed at home, was at 4.64 on a scale of 1 to 10 (see Fig. 4 below), but this rate increases if year 1 is disregarded from this question since their responses reflected their experience in other institutions. The dissatisfaction was due to a number of reasons: technology breakdowns, teacher’s instructional style not adapted to online classes, learner’s acquisition style, demotivation because of the uncertainty under the Covid circumstances…

The findings of this study show that the presence of a language facilitator is primordial, but teacher performance is a prerequisite for student autonomy and motivation to learn the language. In the absence thereof, students’ level of motivation and autonomy drop temporarily and then gain momentum as academic, professional and personal goals appear.

**Conclusion:**

In this paper, we saw how a forced transition to distance language teaching can affect teacher performance as the setting changes. We saw that autonomous teachers yielded the highest rates of student satisfaction. Teachers who were ready to embrace distance language instruction attended specific training and applied as much of their learning in their virtual classrooms. Their students were motivated as they felt their course facilitator was “in control”. Motivation, as we have seen, if a driving force for learning, and learners, especially at tertiary level, have the advantage of
metacognition, definition of goals and digital literacy. A language teacher who is not able to create class content that is compatible with online teaching, that is to say, content that has elements that compensate for the face-to-face classroom, will not be able to motivate the learners and at the same time overlooks an important aspect of language acquisition – online language acquisition – which is not a COVID-incurred fad, but a trend that is here to stay.

It is true that the lockdown took everyone by surprise, but the shift was relatively smooth for most teachers, students and institutions with experience in digital solutions for education. This situation in distance learning requires institutions to engage in teacher education programs, with a focus on digital language pedagogy, i.e., methods that will guarantee student involvement in the acquisition process. An example of this is live co-editing of documents or whiteboard content on Microsoft Teams. Also, focusing on study skills will help students become responsible for their own learning or most of it, with the language facilitator merely “facilitating” the learning. Curriculum development must as well include this digital aspect in course content, thus creating material that can be adapted to online teaching/learning such as links to flash content (games, quizzes …). Institution leadership must also allow teachers and student initiatives to boost creativity among these language acquisition accomplices.

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