

Measuring the Effectiveness of Competency Based E-learning in EFL Classes

Belaid Louiza¹ & Sarnou Hanane²

^{1&2} University Abdelhamid Ibn Badis-Mostaganem, Algeria.

Correspondence: Belaid Louiza, University Abdelhamid Ibn Badis-Mostaganem, Algeria.

Email: belaidlouiza38@yahoo.com

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Abstract: Our research work assesses the extent to which digital tools are integrated to embrace competency based approach in an EFL classroom. Its objective is to check the applicability of teaching materials and e-learning tools to foster learners' classroom understanding of English. In this prospect, our main question is how could competency based e-learning be achieved in an EFL context? As a research instrument, a questionnaire was administered to thirty students in master degree, at Ibn Khaldoun University- Tiaret-Algeria. We concluded that competency based e-learning can be implicated only when shifting from a teacher-centric approach into a learner-centric approach. Thus, it is necessary to follow an approach that tailors learners' competencies and interests.

Keywords: Competency Based Approach, Digital Tools, E-learning, Teacher Centric Approach, Learner Centric Approach

1. Introduction

Within the shift from a teacher centric approach to a learner centric approach, e-learning became necessary to integrate the skills and competencies of the 21st century learner in classroom instructions. Thus, our work assesses the integration of digital technologies to improve learners' overall achievement. Its objectives are first to investigate the extent to which competency based e-learning is incorporated to help learners deal with real-life problems, and to examine the correlation between competency, e-learning and performance. As long as the 21st century teacher is not the only resource of information, the learner is surrounded with multiple resources from which he/she can have access to knowledge. Our main question for this enquiry searches for the effects of implementing CB e-learning on students' overall performance. In this prospect, we hypothesise that there exists a correlation between competency and performance, and there is a significant influence of e-Learning delivery method on individuals' performance. As a research method, a questionnaire was handed to 30 students, master degree, at the University of Ibn Khaldoun- Tiaret, Algeria. We deduced that some lectures are still traditional and e-learning is not achieved due to the unavailability of teaching materials; more than that, students are aware of the fact that distance learning is beneficial, but not as face to face interaction with their teachers. There is an absence of motivation to embrace distance education in a traditional classroom-based learning. Thus, in order to achieve competency based delivery of learning; solutions should imply a learner centric approach.

2. Literature Review

Teaching is a difficult task to perform, and transmitting knowledge for learners who are well versed in using ICTs is another intricate problem. Competency based approach requires not only the theoretical knowledge of helping learners to solve real life problems, but also being familiar with how to use, effectively, digital means to address students with distinct learning styles, competencies and skills. Though the causes of low performance might be universal, but it all depends on the context and conditions of English teaching/learning (Jha et al., 2012) and the ICTs used in the classroom are considered as an internal classroom factor which might influence learners' performance in foreign languages. (Mushtaq & Khan, 2012)

Sumithra (2014), in her work, put emphasis on the integration of e-learning to effectively implement competency based learning. She raised three important steps to foster learners' performance within CBA. First, the psychology of students matters, teachers should attract the attention of learners by clarifying why this topic should be studied, and what are the effects of being familiar with it, thus "the best way to integrate adults in their learning is to inform them why they need to know the topic, teaching the topic using experiential learning techniques, and having the adults solve a problem that is of importance to them" (p. 89). Second, the information per se is the face of learning, it is an element that is shared, used and reused by teachers with different generations. In this prospect, updating the content is important for the instructor and the learner to break monotony in the classroom and raise excitement and interest. Third, a learner-centric environment is what makes most of the students elevate and demand e-learning mainly because it suits the requirement of the individuals' needs, as Sumithra (2014) states "it is a perspective of talent, interest, specific needs and practices" (p. 89).

As a matter of fact, in Algeria, Competency Based Approach has been ratified for teaching different school subjects; and English is one of these school subjects since 2002 (Mirza, 2016). What make CBA varies from other teaching reforms is the introduction of project work. Thanks to project work, instructors will be able to assess learners' competence and performance, and to evaluate the learned competency that is strongly needed in the workplace. Riche et al. (2005) as quoted in Aimeur (2010) argue that "it is only through carrying out project work that we and our learners can live up to the basic principles of the Competency Based Approach" (p. 24).

Likewise, Sriprakash (2012) stresses the role of teachers in developing the learners' skills and competencies; they should not only be the resource of information but facilitators of knowledge, and mediators of how to analyse and evaluate this knowledge, in order to reach the highest levels of Bloom's hierarchy, hence helping learners to select what is appropriate when encountering multiple resources of information. For this reason, being unfamiliar with how to implement the teaching approach in an EFL classroom and counting only on a traditional classroom could decrease achievement. It is necessary for teachers, as well, to be skillful and equipped with the needed competencies in order to help learners interact with the world efficiently (Mirza, 2016).

As a matter of fact, the National Curriculum for elementary and secondary education (NCF 1998), as quoted in Sriprakash (2012) summed up the 21st century instructor as follows:

The teacher's role will be one of helping the pupil to develop skills in collecting information, their verification and evaluation for further processing and structuring for drawing inferences. He/she will be required to be not only an instructor but a resource person for information search and analysis. He/she will be required to devise diverse ways of learning unique to different areas of study which would help the pupil in developing self-confidence and in learning how to learn (p. 35).

Sriprakash (2012) argues that the process of 'learning by doing' is basically proposed through 'interactive modes of teaching'. A learner-centered approach aims to challenge the pre-existing teaching methods like rote learning. Learning is assured over the reproduction of information and "an emphasis which greatly expanded the expected outcomes of schooling for learners. In this model, 'curiosity', 'independent thinking', 'problem solving', and 'self-learning' were some of the expectations placed on learners" (p. 35). In fact, the expectations of instructors were developed likewise in which they were considered as facilitators of learning, who are required to respond to the individuals' abilities, interests and learning needs.

3. Results and Discussion

In order to conduct this enquiry we opted for a survey as a research instrument, it encompasses open ended and close ended questions. 30 participants were selected out of the whole population; our sample was comprised of 23 % of males and 77 % of females. The participants are first year Master students at the University of Ibn Khaldoun Tiaret, specialized in Linguistics. 97% of our participants have access to internet and are quite familiar with what e-learning refers to; they use internet at home and are aware of the different learning applications it provides as videos, PowerPoint, and so forth. Conversely, 3% do not have internet access, though they are familiar with its various services as well.

Evidently, our sample displays awareness of the advantages of using ICTs and e-learning means to understand better; however, its replies clarify its lack of interest in learning because of the clash between their active role in using internet at home, and their passive engagement at university which is still traditionally-based. Table 1 below clarifies that the majority of the university lectures are still traditional (70%) backed up with handouts to hand for learners, whereas 30% are lectures based on PowerPoint presentations through data show. Thus, we deduce that the university lectures are still traditional; and this is associated to the lack of teaching materials in the institution, as an alternative method, handouts are provided to students. Actually, that is what students are asking for, even if they attend regularly, these documents are what make them feel at ease to prepare for tests or final exams.

Table 1: the nature of instructors' lectures at university

University lectures	Number of respondents	Percentage %
Traditional	21	70%
Innovative via using technology	09	30%
Total	30	100%

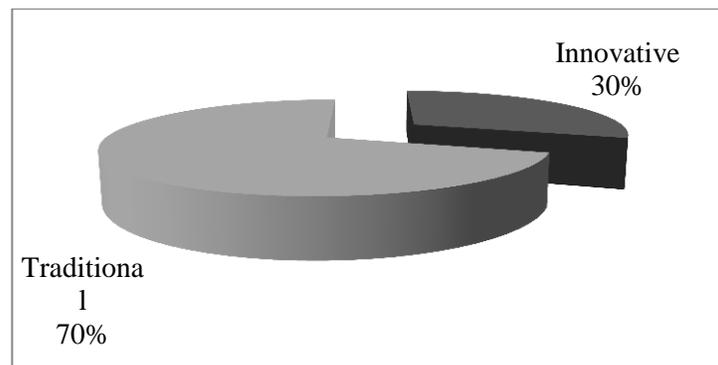


Figure 1: The nature of lectures at university

In fact, we synthesized that learners are familiar with the effectiveness of applying e-learning to foster their learning competencies, but it is quite sure that, however distance education is very helpful, but still face to face contact is quite important because it promotes the interaction between the teacher and the learner. Their answers diverge between welcoming e-learning and rejecting it. Some students claim that not all of them can attend their classes regularly because they live far, so the student can have access to the courses online without making efforts to displace. Others argue that they are not well prepared for this stage of learning, and students cannot understand well; hence, face to face learning is better because they can ask their teachers about anything they do not understand; however, it all depends on teachers' and learners' motivation and interest in getting knowledge. Some learners state that this method might not be successful because students are not cultivated to use such methods. Students, who are working as teachers or in companies, embraced the idea claiming that it is very helpful in order to reconcile between work and education; more than that, they claim that lectures are not often sufficient to have the required knowledge because they miss many lectures due to their regular absences.

Table 2: Embracing distance education at university

Distance Education at University	Number	Percentage %
Very helpful	07	23.33%
Face to face contact is better	23	76.67%
Total	30	100%

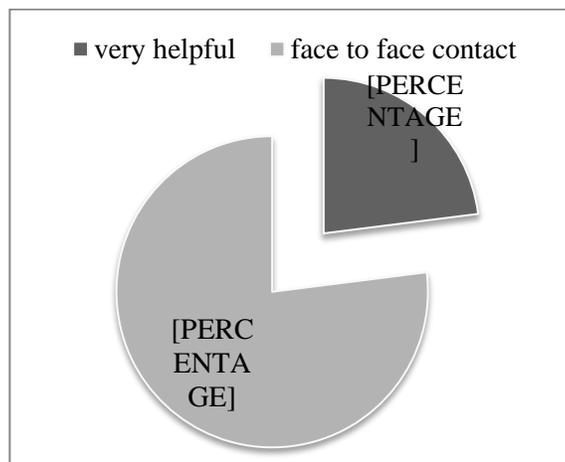


Figure 2: Distance education as an alternative approach

As clarified in Table 3 below, 40% of students prefer handouts over any other tool, 30% goes for data show presentations, while 30% prefer group work. The majority asks about handouts; though they can understand better via PowerPoint presentations in the classroom; they are programmed to count on handouts after each lecture; their notes are not sufficient for them to prepare for an examination. 30% of students choose group work as a tool to foster their learning especially for introvert and passive learners who dislike expressing themselves in front of their classmates.

Table 3: Students' approach to learning

Learning choice	Number of respondents	Percentage %
Data-show presentations	09	30%
Handouts	12	40%
Group work	09	30%
Total	30	100%

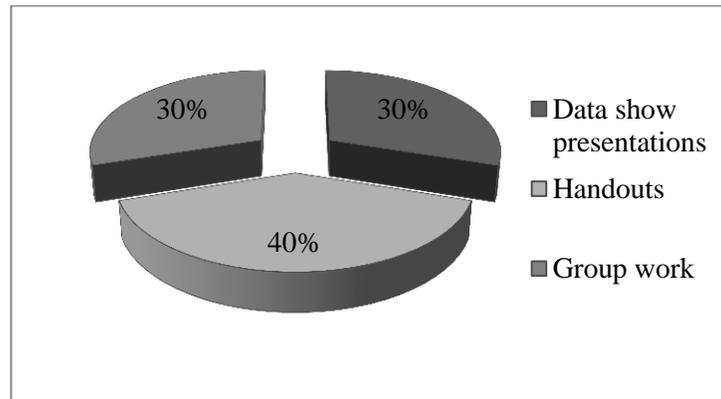


Figure 3: Learners best method to learn in class

Apparently, as mentioned in Figure 4 below, 43% of students choose videos to understand better. 30% choose PowerPoint presentations; on the contrary few participants opt for articles, eBooks, websites and even podcasts. Videos, as observed, introduce information associated to the subject matter and explain the information in a simple way, providing clear examples and real life illustrations. As for the PowerPoint works, they are clear precise and concise; it is not overloaded with knowledge but only key points. This might clarify that the majority are visual and auditory learners who need to see the information and hear it from a professional in a simple manner. The learners' e-learning styles are well improved because of the daily use of learners to internet; in this vein, they think that internet, with its different online services, tailor their needs and interests; that is why their understanding in the classroom is incomplete.

Table 4: Learners' best method in learning

Students learn better through:	Number	Percentage %
PowerPoint	09	30%
articles	01	3.33%
e-books	04	13.33%
websites	02	6.67%
videos	13	43.33%
podcasts	01	3.33%
Total	30	100%

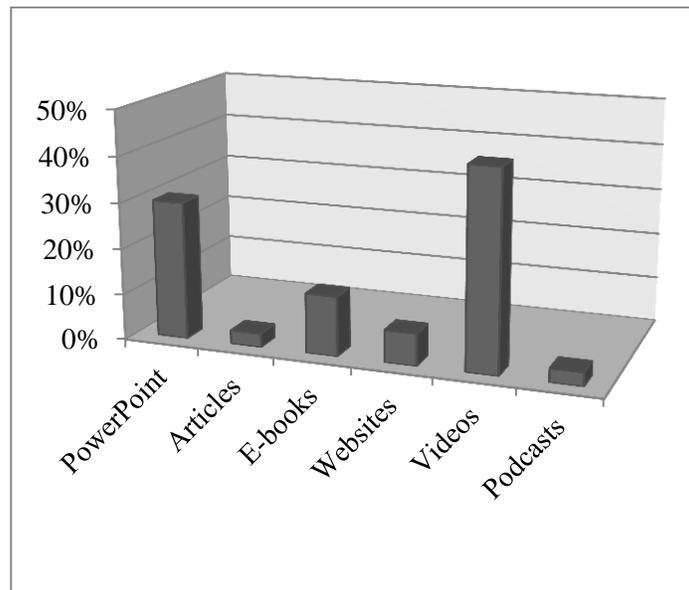


Figure 4: Students' approach to learning

More importantly, as clarified in Figure 5 below, 40% of students state that they do not have any interest towards books to read from or make research. 37% are interested but to a certain extent and 16% only are interested to a great extent. This latter assumes the addiction of learners in using internet to search for any method to learn from except books. The 21st century learner is indeed surrounded by multiple resources especially on internet; this latter suits, greatly, the needs of learners more than books, and they

fit all their e-learning styles and preferences, thus they prefer to surf the net rather than search on books. In a nutshell, the value of books is decreasing in comparison to internet.

Table 5: Learners motivation towards books

Learners' reading interests	Not at all	To some extent	To a moderate extent	To a great extent
Number	12	11	2	5
Percentage %	40%	37%	7%	16%

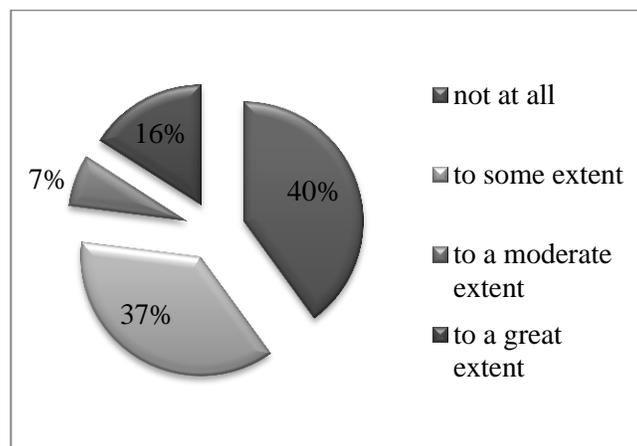


Figure 5: Learners' interest in books

As a matter of fact, e-learning cannot be achieved due to students' disinterest; their confessions clarify that they are not serious enough to lean on distance education as a means to foster their understanding. More than that, the duration of lectures covered within one year is not enough to develop learners' skills and competencies, at least not all competencies are covered, 53% of students show their awareness of this latter clarifying that the lectures' timing is not enough to develop the language skills appropriately. In this prospect, in order to achieve competency based delivery of learning; a learner centric approach should be taken seriously with all its necessary conditions to be applied successfully.

Actually, the creation of a learner centered environment requires knowing students not only as learners but as individuals with different personalities, social backgrounds, competencies and learning preferences. Instructors should understand their students' strengths, weaknesses and needs and be able to differentiate the ways they learn. Additionally, classroom management is another key point towards the success of the teaching/ learning process, when the teacher can manage and organize the classroom, he/she is greatly qualified to construct an environment in which learners are at the core of learning. The

application of a learner-centered approach requires incorporating multiple paths to knowledge with the help of technology in the classroom. More than that, teachers' collaboration/coordination with one another and with decision makers is necessary; at least to share from one another's experience, to reflect on their teaching and correct what was a failure. In a nutshell, the 21st century teacher is not only a resource of information, but he/she has to perform different roles, he/she should be a facilitator, a collaborator, a contributor, a curriculum adapter and designer.

In order for novice teachers to check the extent to which a learner-centric approach is inserted in the class, he/she should raise the following questions. First, what is the content or knowledge that I would like to teach and what skills should be covered through this knowledge. Second, what are the teaching materials that I need to transmit this knowledge effectively? Third, what do I expect my learners to learn from this knowledge and fourth how shall I assess the success or failure of the learning (Sumithra, 2014).

4. Conclusion

The e-learning programs can be effectively delivered by taking into cognizance the necessary requirements to improve the level of the individual and his/her overall performance. Empowering students is one of the prerequisite aims of teaching, and is exactly what they need to be successful in this global world. Our work put emphasis on the applicability of e-learning at university along with Competency based approach, besides the extent to which distance learning is positively perceived by Master students at the University of Ibn Khaldoun-Tiaret. Students are aware of the fact that distance learning can be helpful for workers; however, it is not seen as a serious approach to learning because of the lack of motivation to embrace it. It is noteworthy to mention that the majority of learners have access to internet; their e-learning styles are well developed thanks to the use of this latter and its multiple learning devices that it offers. Unfortunately, because of the existence of multiple technological resources of information, the usability of books is eliminated to a great extent. At last, the classes are traditionally based, though the student is well versed with e-learning technologies, but he/she is biased towards handouts, and not books, to avoid taking notes and follow the "rote learning" par excellence.

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