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Virtual classroom site in French written expression lesson: a practice sample

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Abstract

The problems of a Second Language Learner in written expression have made us to practise a different teaching method, and we have used a virtual classroom site for French Written expression lesson. The virtual classroom site has been prepared for Writing II lesson which is given second term of first class in French Language Teaching Main Art in Education Faculty of Anatolian University. The sample of the study consists of 30 students. Half of the students used traditional way of learning (control group), the other half of them used virtual classroom site (experiment group). We have researched the contributions of virtual classroom site on French Written expression lesson by using different kinds of data collecting tools like pre-test, motivation questionnaire and interview technique.

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1. Introduction

The ways of obtaining knowledge and getting across with people have changed with becoming widespread of new communication and informatics technologies. Societies' operations have started to depend on technologies. Moreover service and manufacturing sectors have started to get and use these technologies. Education sector has been included in this rapid development, and many researches have been done on contribution of new communication and informatics technologies on education (see. Crinon & Gautellier). Technologies have been included in teaching methods to provide better foreign language education which keeps pace with changes and technologies and adopts them. However, although the mutual aim of all teaching methods is to be acquired of four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), it is seen that writing skill has not benefited from scientific and technological developments in the cause of improving speaking skill (Cuq,2003,p.178).

However, writing skill has started to gain importance and has been in the front rank in computer based education with gaining validity of communication method in 70s, and having computers of language classrooms in 80s. But education with computers has not showed the desired effects on gaining and developing of writing skill. Because:

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-Gaining writing skill depends on teaching of writing process (planning, writing, control) and computer cannot provide this education on its own. Actually the thing which is required to be done is to join the qualities of teacher and computer (Hayes&lower, 1980; Whalen, 1994).

-Writing activity requires using socio-cultural and communication knowledge (Albert, 1998, p.60-61). However, since the computer cannot check the validity and correctness of student's text, importance of teacher has been emphasized one more time.

-People, who think that students could plan their texts better, and overview them better and also page layout of these texts will be more organized with word processor like Microsoft word, have been disappointed(Crinon, 2000, p.47). Indeed, the results of many researches which their subjects are word processor and writing activity has showed that these processors are not very effective on improving students' writing skills.

-Since the computers cannot analyse the texts being longer than a few lines, writing activities done on the computer are limited with monotonous activities like short answer, vocabulary knowledge, linguistics, dictation and word-order. Thus, creativity which is one of the required items of writing skill and motivation which is one of the required items of learning activity have not been provided.

According to these four points, we realize that the computer cannot fulfil the necessities of writing activity on its own. Of course we know that it provides many advantages to the students and it is a valuable tool. However, we think that it can be an auxiliary tool besides education given by the teacher until students reach a specific level. First of all students should know the steps of writing process and how to implement these steps to be able to use the computer to plan and control their texts. That is, the presence of a teacher is important. Contrary to computer, a teacher can teach writing process, evaluate the knowledge, approve the validity and correctness of socio-cultural and communication knowledge and guide them when they have difficulties, and also can see superficial mistakes in texts like grammar and spelling as computers do. However a teacher can see more basic mistakes like integrity and cohesion, and can realize the vocabulary knowledge of students. Moreover, a teacher can check and evaluate written text how long they are.

Briefly, person factor has important place in written expression. But we cannot disregard facilitator and motivational qualities of computers. Especially, computers provide important contributions thanks to internet which provide us to reach different kinds of texts, information about linguistic and writing activities, and cooperative writing activities providing real communication situations. So in this research, our problem is to carry out a teaching model which fulfils the requirements of student centred writing education, motivates the students, new tools are used, and supports the presence of the teacher in terms of both teaching writing skill and evaluating it. In this context, we designed a virtual classroom site which is based on virtual study environment and provides virtual tools and contents related with users' studies. We thought that this virtual environment could harmonize the computer and aim of the lesson, and works studied in the classroom with teachers and works studied individually outside the classroom.

2. Method

2.1. Virtual classroom site formed for written expression.

2.1.1. What is virtual classroom site?

Virtual classroom site is a platform that the lesson is formed by the teacher, can be used basing on virtual study environment in the classroom, school and outside the school and has free surf and registered access qualities. The most important characteristic of virtual classroom site is to be used in the classroom without requiring laboratory. The teacher recites the lesson with a computer having internet connection by using projector. That is, only one computer is enough to recite the lesson in the classroom. Moreover students can reach the content of lesson and revise previous lesson if they do not attend the lesson whenever they want, but it is impossible to reach following lessons and topics.

2.1.2. WEBCT

We used a platform named as WebCT to create a written expression lesson in virtual classroom site which combines the teacher, computer and internet. Web Course Tools (webCT) is classroom management and lesson

development platform in the internet environment. It includes communication tools (e-mail, discussion groups...), evaluation tools (tests and exercises...), documents (word, power point...). People who want to create lessons site can present their lessons in the internet environment by using the services of the platform or using sources from the internet. Internet or network is required to prepare lesson with WebCT. User name and password are given to access the prepared lesson.

2.1.3. *The content of virtual classroom site*

Teacher and students access the site <http://webct.aof.edu.tr:8900> being entirely French after writing their user names and passwords. This page consists of totally 10 buttons.

1. <Members > button: Names of the students taking French Written Expression lesson via this site take place in here. The aim is to get the site customized and create ownership sense on students.
2. <Lesson introduction> button: Students can access the definition and aim of French written Expression II lesson and the weekly lesson plan of the lesson.
3. <Lessons > button: The subjects and materials take place here. Students can access them whenever they want and get them printed out.
4. <Homework> button: Students send their homework via e-mail.
5. <Agenda> button: there is a calendar, and students write notes on definite date like their exam date, birth date etc., and also they prepare weekly or monthly lesson plan. Besides, teacher can announce the time slots like exam dates and deadline for homework via this calendar.
6. <Mark> button: students can learn their exam results from this button.
7. <Links> button: this button provides students to access the links related to written Expression lesson given by the teacher. E.g. French Grammar, spelling guide and vocabulary games.
8. <Dictionaries> button: There are three electronic dictionaries, French, Turkish-French and French-Turkish.
9. <Forum> button: This button provides students to contact with the teacher of lesson and their friends. They can discuss about their homework and ask questions when they don't understand what they do. The aim is to increase the quality of written expression lesson. This button is put into service of students with these principles: human factor is important for the person fulfilling writing activity (Fortier& Prefontaine, 1989, p.296) and also the time of help is as important as the person who helps (a.g.e.,p.293). Besides, there is an interaction between students.
10. <Announcement>button: student can access the announcements about place and duration of the exams, make-up lessons and cancelled lessons.

2.2. *Research Model, Sample and Application of Experiment*

We applied quantitative and qualitative research model. While quantitative research model was used to measure students' motivation via questionnaire, qualitative research method was used to designate the students' opinions. Besides, pre-test and post-test were applied to measure students' academic achievements and their success scores were obtained.

Virtual classroom site was created for first class students of French Written Expression II lesson taking place in French Language Teaching Main Art Department of Anatolian University, Education Faculty. Prescribed impacts via this site are to decrease the problems which students have in written expression, raise students' success marks, and increase students' motivation, thus to measure the effectiveness of the virtual classroom site.

Therefore;

- We separated the sample consisting of 30 people into two groups: A control group consisting of 15 people and using traditional way while teaching written expression lesson; an experimental group consisting of 15 people and using virtual classroom site while teaching this lesson. The sample consists of 27 girls and 3 boys being 20-25 years old. They are the first class students of French Language Teaching Department in Anatolian University. The number of students is always between 35 and 40 for each class, because French is not preferred in Turkey this is due to the dominance of English.

- We applied pre and post tests being appropriate to the aims of written expression for both groups. The aim was to compare the success scores of pre-test with the success scores of post-tests. Besides the results of pre-test provided us to form two homogeneous groups in terms of success: there were students getting bad and good marks from pre-test in each groups.
- After applying pre-test in the last week of written expression lesson in the first semester, post-test was applied after ten weeks written expression lesson taught by using traditional method in one group and by using virtual classroom site in the other group. Pre and post test had quality of replicable scale, since the duration was appropriate between two tests. That is both of the tests were same;
- We used motivation questionnaire to the experimental group to see whether virtual classroom site provides motivation or not, they are more motivated or not, and to see their learning satisfactions.
- We applied interview method on the experimental group. The aim was to investigate the contributions of virtual classroom site, to support and verify the results gained from the comparison of pre-test and post-test.

3. Findings

The results, gained after application, are given below.

- The results of pre-test and post-test were compared with in each group. Whether it has been studied in virtual classroom site or not, the rising were observed in the success grades of almost all the student. However, when the comparison was made between the groups, some minor differences were seen in experimental group. Indeed, it was also seen that success grades of students using virtual classroom site were higher, and success grade differences between pre-test and post-test was also higher.
- The results of motivation questionnaire were more positive. Most of 15 students stated that;
 1. Learning with virtual classroom site was better that traditional method.
 2. The site presented them different lesson materials.
 3. The site affected their success in a positive way.
 4. The site provided them learning easiness in terms of environment.
 5. The site provided them better learning opportunities.
 6. The site provided rapid access.
 7. The lessons were more interesting.
 8. The site provided learning easiness in terms of time.
 9. The site provided them to communicate with their teachers.
 10. The site provided us more comfortable environment.

We collected the data gained from interview method under four main themes.

1. Facilities provided by virtual classroom site: The students stated that they benefited from lesson materials and dictionaries and the site provided them study flexibility in terms of time and place.
2. Contributions of virtual classroom site to written expression lesson: They could communicate with their teachers when they had a problem, and reading the messages of discussion groups provided them benefits.

3. Facilities of the site for written expression homework: The students stated that they were satisfied by reminding the homework topics, using grammar and lexical links, and asking questions to their friends when they didn't understand homework.
4. Opinions of the students about virtual classroom site: Students stated positive opinions about virtual classroom site as it was in motivation questionnaire. According to them using this site was better than traditional way of teaching.

4. Result and Discussion

As a result, we are considering that we applied a teaching model which fulfils the requirements of student centred writing education, motivates the students, new tools are used, and supports the presence of the teacher in terms of both teaching writing skill and evaluating it. Motivation, communication with teacher and links are the most positive sides of the site stated by the students. Beside these, we are aware that virtual classroom site has not important effects on students' success grades, and we think that this issue can be a new research study to examine the reasons. However, one of the reasons is to use this site only one semester and students could not become familiar with the site, and could not get used to use it entirely. This issue was uttered one of the students during interview.

Student N08 said: I got higher marks. My grades did not changed in the first mid-term exam, but I got higher mark in the second exam thanks to this site since I learnt how to use it.

However, when it is evaluated generally we believe that the students fulfil the necessities of virtual classroom environment like supporting the site from inside and outside the classroom, accessing the lessons whenever they want, and getting teacher support from distance.

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