The 2nd Online Conference on Research into Using Technology for Language Learning was held on 5–6 October 2017. This annual event, organised by the Laureate-Cambridge Online Language Learning Research Network (OLLReN), gives both experienced and early-career researchers from around the world a place to share their work into the impact of technology to support language learning. The interactive format allows for both presentation and discussion of research and its implications. This book contains short summaries of each of the sessions in the 2017 conference.

The OLLReN management board would like to thank the IATEFL Learning Technologies SIG (LTSIG) for their valuable help in supporting and running the conference.

We would also like to thank all the presenters and attendees for their excellent contributions to this year’s event.

For more information about OLLReN, visit http://ollren.org.
For more information about the LTSIG, visit https://ltsig.iatefl.org.
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VEO AND VEO EUROPA: ENHANCED INTERACTIONAL INSIGHT FOR LEARNING, SHARED ACROSS GLOBAL NETWORKS

VEO ORIGINS

VEO’s novel video tagging technology, developed initially for teacher training, has provided a basis for interactive online learning across several fields. The system’s original conception derived from solving the challenges of generating scalable, sustainable change in teaching practice in Sub-Saharan Africa and North East England. By replacing traditional training sessions and observations with shared video of genuine interaction and process, it was found that ongoing professional development was more efficient and effective, situating learning in everyday practice.

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE

In order to make video more accessible and easy to use, the idea of time-stamp tagging key moments for instant review provides VEO’s uniqueness. This not only allows people to jump straight to important instances, but also adds quantitative data to the rich, qualitative video. Video can be tagged both live and retrospectively, and then shared online via a secure professional/social learning platform. Combining data types means advantages of both are accessed for analyzing and reviewing video, to improve performance, interaction, skill or process, and generating vast learning potential.

RESEARCHING VEO

Exploring the possibilities that are opened up has occurred in a number of research projects, notable inclusions being a two-year Erasmus+ project: VEO Europa, and an 18-month global project: SETTVEO.

In the former, working with universities, schools and training organisations in the UK, Germany, Finland, Bulgaria and Turkey, use cases in developing spoken interaction across borders have been experimented with, and findings shared. Strong cross-border interest has seen further participants co-opted from Spain, the USA and beyond. In SETTVEO and other subsequent pilots, potential for enhancing understanding of language learning globally. Here the key is to provide instant video feedback, so that the most difficult skill for many, speaking, can be enhanced with self-awareness and guidance from peers. Tags highlight strengths and areas for development according to pre-configured rubrics.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE AND REFLECTION IN GLOBAL NETWORKS

These studies and VEO’s initial client users have confirmed that the system can be used very effectively in continuous learning cycles around actual practice, whether process or interaction oriented. Learning networks are growing globally, around access to key moments of video, useful for self and peer reflection, and moderated by teachers, trainers and lecturers. In combining quantitative and qualitative elements, VEO as a simple but effective technology can finally provide an effective means to learn from experience (Dewey, 1938) and reflective thought (1910).

LARGE-SCALE BENEFITS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The VEO tools, enabling reflective approaches to interaction, can lead to more human-centred, communicative and inherently scalable video-based learning systems, in the form of interconnected online networks, and can cross national and cultural boundaries so that language learning can happen communicatively yet analytically at distance and scale.

REFERENCES


The experience hereby reported involved 25 Spanish speaking teacher trainees in an English Teaching Training College in La Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina. The study aimed at confronting students’ perception and production of features of connected speech at the beginning and at the end of a module. Students carried out a diagnostic listening and speaking test, which evidenced considerable difficulty in recognizing and producing stretches with either one or a combination of the following features of connected speech: more than two weak forms, catenation, and different cases of assimilation and elision of sounds. Students were not given any feedback or the tests back. The exact same test was repeated after students were trained following the steps described below.

With different theories on the acquisition of foreign sounds as framework (Polivanov 1931/1964; Trubetzkoy 1969; Dupoux 2002; Flege 1987/2003) and following the stages described by Celce Murcia (2003) and Pennington (1996), five stages were designed: identification, analysis, imitation, controlled practice and communicative practice.

Identification involved exposing students to texts naturally rich in a certain feature. Two tools were used to find suitable texts: Playphrase.me and Tubequizard. Playphrase.me is a multi-modal corpus-like website that allows the search of words or phrases that have been uttered in short video clips from popular TV shows and films, providing authentic input. Tubequizard enables teachers to search for specific words or expressions in YouTube video subtitles. Once the text was chosen, students worked on tasks to grasp the gist of the audio material.

Analysis focused on providing students with the ‘sight and sound of words’ (Cauldwell, 2017), making sounds visible for students (Underhill, 2012). To such end, students worked with Sonocent’s Audio Notetaker, software that allows teachers to design exercises on three different panes (the reference pane, the text pane and the audio pane). Another task students carried out involved subtitling extracts from videos using the desktop app Aegisub, and finally they worked filling the blanks in quizzes prepared on Tubequizard.

Imitation was the first practice stage. Students first worked following Gattegno’s silent way to teaching: they uttered phrases without actually producing them out loud, concentrating how articulators moved while looking at themselves using the front camera of their cellphones.

Controlled practice and communicative practice included an array of activities from less contextualized to more realistic tasks. Students recorded their productions (shadowing activities, cued dialogues, discussions, etc.) and uploaded them in Soundcloud, a platform which provides an excellent tool to share, compare and get feedback. This last feature is of particular importance since pop-up comments – with peer or teacher feedback – reinforced the immediacy of auditory and visual input.

Comparing pre and post-tests, a significant improvement in both the perception and production of the different features of connected speech is evident. The integration of a number of technology-aided activities has yielded interesting results concerning effective scaffolding for learners to achieve an automatized use of features of connected speech. Ubiquitous learning has also been successfully fostered together with learner autonomy as students have reported finding technology tools useful to keep practicing on their own after lessons.
TECHNOLOGY-AIDED ACTIVITIES IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF FOREIGN SOUNDS

REFERENCES


This study investigated the impact of the implementation of digital badges on primary students’ motivation in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in remote lessons.

The participants were 343 students, 4th to 6th graders ranging from 9 to 11/12 years old, in public schools in Uruguay and 16 classroom teachers. They all participate in the blended learning project: Plan Ceibal en Inglés by which 3,572 groups of primary students are weekly taught English lessons through videoconference. A remote teacher of English delivers a 45-minute lesson once a week and the classroom teacher, who may or may not know the language, teaches two additional 45-minute lessons during the same week.

Motivation has been a constant concern in TEFL. Harmer (2001, p.51) stated that ‘motivation is some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something’.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are essential in the process of learning a language and literature reviews on the area reveal that not only the use of external rewards, but the manner in which external rewards are implemented – including the form of reward, its relationship to the desired behaviour and the rationale behind their use is what impact upon intrinsic motivation (Slavin, 1999).

An effective teaching approach such as digital badges as visual representations of achievements of the learners has been implemented in this study in the hope of actively engaging students in their learning. A positive aspect of digital badges is that ‘acquiring digital badges motivate some learners to continuously engage with online materials and activities that have been designed to help them achieve intended learning outcomes’ (Gibson et al., 2013).

The method of collection of data were two questionnaires administered to all students and classroom teachers, one measuring acceptance of badges among students and the other investigating the teachers’ views on the positive impact digital badges might have on their students' motivation.

Data was also collected by analyzing the graphics which depict the students’ online participation in the platform in the first six months of the school year. The findings reveal that their involvement has been increasing considerably with some fluctuations which require further analysis.

Results have shown that badges are widely accepted in the school community and that the increased participation in the platform and in class confirmed that the use of badges has contributed to hone their motivation to engage in their learning.

More research in this area is needed to confirm the tendency shown which reveals that using badges is an effective motivational strategy to promote high level of primary students’ active participation in their learning process.

REFERENCES


Meticulously correcting errors and writing feedback summaries on students’ writing can be time-consuming and often seems less effective than desired. To address this issue, I devised the innovative Learner-Driven Feedback (LDF) procedure, where feedback is given by teachers on draft texts, but learners ‘drive’ how and on what they receive feedback: they can choose a delivery mode and pose questions to the tutor about their work.

Three ideas are combined within the LDF procedure.

1. Research in higher education into factors that make feedback sustainable, i.e. effective long term. Formative explanations of corrections, and guidance transferable to future tasks are generally perceived as most effective, as students often engage more deeply with this feedback. Students’ engagement is shown to increase when feedback is interactive (Carless et al, 2011).

2. Responding to learners’ individual queries. This learner-centred approach prompts students to pose questions on textual composition (and language concerns, if writing in their L2) to which tutors respond (e.g. Campbell & Schumm-Fauster, 2013). Such dialogic feedback has been shown to promote learner autonomy, be formative and be time-efficient for teachers, as well as helping make feedback sustainable (Nicol, 2010).

3. Delivering feedback digitally, for example as tracked changes, annotations, emails, or audio recordings. Studies into these feedback delivery modes have shown advantages in both higher education (McCabe et al, 2011) and foreign language instruction (Cloete, 2014), which include their learner-centredness, time efficiency for tutors, and increased student motivation, as well as the amount of explanation that can be provided.

My research aimed to discern EAP students’ receptivity to LDF by surveying their perceptions of its usability and effectiveness after working with it for one term. Students were given a choice of feedback delivery modes, and guidance on asking effective questions. In an initial exploration (Maas, 2017), surveyed students showed positive attitudes towards LDF for giving feedback on language accuracy and text structure in draft essays, and particularly appreciated digital delivery. Moreover, their results on the essay written using LDF were higher than on other essay assessments, thus their perceptions of improvements appear accurate. My second study (Maas, forthcoming) explored perceived benefits of specific digital feedback modes for language accuracy and writing-related academic skills. Students again showed high levels of receptivity to LDF, and survey responses highlighted affordances of different modes for giving feedback on certain aspects of language or academic skills. Most notably, feedback in emails and audio recordings were seen as most effective for improving writing-related academic skills and issues with text structure, whereas annotations were seen as most helpful for improving language accuracy and treating local errors.

Students in both studies reported increased motivation and autonomy as academic writers, as well as deeper engagement with feedback, especially on individual weaknesses. My findings, and research supporting the individual components of LDF, thus highlight mechanisms which potentially underpin how it provides sustainable feedback. These also include it being interactive, personal and affording scope for explanations and feedforward; factors which represent compelling reasons to pilot LDF in other EAP and ELT contexts.
REFERENCES


SPEECH TECHNOLOGY IN LANGUAGE APPS: THE UNREALISED POTENTIAL OF ROSETTA STONE, DUOLINGO, BABBEL AND MANGO LANGUAGES

Joan Palmiter Bajorek

Joan Palmiter Bajorek is a doctoral student in the Second Language Acquisition and Teaching Program at the University of Arizona. At the University of California, Davis, Bajorek earned an MA in Linguistics in 2016 and worked as an Associate Instructor of French. A recent presenter at Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium (CALICO), Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching (PSSLT), Annual Symposium on Spanish as a Heritage Language (SSHL), Second Language Digital Literacies & Arizona Computer-assisted Language Learning (L2DL/ AZCALL) Symposium, and Indiana University Corpus Linguistics Fest, Bajorek's research explores data-driven language education, pronunciation, and speech technology.

Millions of language learners worldwide use technology to improve their second language (L2) speech, but not all software adequately supports this vital aspect of language acquisition (Duffy, 2015). This study provides a snapshot of the current state of L2 pronunciation technology through the review of prominent computer-assisted language learning (CALL) software (Lotherington, 2016): Rosetta Stone, Duolingo, Babbel, and Mango Languages. This research suggests improvements for effective, well-designed pedagogical materials for intelligible pronunciation.

To review speech technology, empirical research and other linguistic reviews frame analysis of L2 pronunciation material. Contrary to Krashen's Theories of Comprehensible Input (1982), exposure alone does not result in speech development: even up to four years of university coursework (Elliott 1995; Fortune & Tedick 2015; Solon 2016). Explicit pronunciation instruction is shown to be effective in minutes to weeks including phonological and phonetic exercises (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1997), tongue visualizations (Katz & Mehta, 2015), and text-to-speech exercises (Liakin, Cardoso, & Liakina, 2017), among other experimental techniques.

Through the lens of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory, patterns in these successful empirical studies include Explicit Instruction (Ellis, 2005), Focus-on-Form (Doughty & Williams, 1998), Positive and Negative Feedback (Gass 2013; Wiggins 2012), and Noticing techniques (Schmidt, 1994/1995). Crucially, if intelligibility of oral communication is a desired outcome of language instruction (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2016), explicit instruction and feedback may be essential to L2 pronunciation development.

The software reviewed have unrealised potential for improvement. This may be a result of software that is designed from the ineffective non-technology pedagogical materials already in circulation (Lord & Fionda, 2013). Most delivered poor or inadequate feedback, exemplified by Duolingo's simplistic ‘binary feedback’ (Chapelle, 2001). Attractive waveform images generated by the software of Mango Languages provided no feedback as to the ‘acceptability’ of utterances. Rosetta Stone provided cryptic waveforms and unsubstantiated ‘correctness’ feedback. Babbel was the best software reviewed, integrating explicit pronunciation into lessons, but provided insufficient explanation of its feedback.

Other reviewers also question the efficacy of software; Economist reviewer Johnson states of Duolingo's pronunciation material assessed that, '[i]f I didn't already know the basics of French conversation, I'd be helpless in France' (2013). Mango Language's instructional material provides pronunciation-form mapping which could be helpful, but match-ups of target and learner waveforms give little useful information.

A significant finding is the misleading ‘scientific’ nature of much of the technology through waveforms and intonation contours. Of Rosetta's Stone's pronunciation material, Santos writes that it is unclear 'how ordinary language learners could benefit from such graphic depictions ... without proper linguistic or phonetic training' (2011, p.183). Users may interpret phonetic graphics as innovative support. However, visualizations without feedback have been demonstrated to be useless in L2 pronunciation development (Kartushina, Hervais-Adelman, Frauenfelder, & Golestani, 2015).

Future language technology needs to incorporate the best aspects of powerful automatic speech recognition software into sophisticated L2 resources. This review concludes that targeted feedback, explicit instruction, and clear, data-driven visuals are imperative in L2 pronunciation technology. Researchers, educators, and learners can demand more from language technology and integrate these findings in the development of future tools.
REFERENCES


Quiz Your English (Cambridge English, 2017) is a free app designed to encourage learners to challenge other learners to short language quizzes. It was created by Cambridge English in part to understand whether some of the ‘gamification’ features like challenging your friends, and earning points would provide a sufficient motivator to encourage deeper engagement. Six months and an astonishing 2 million games later we have started to review the usage data to try to understand what kept learners staying engaged, what did not, and how the mobile application features can encourage and enhance specific learning behaviours such as incidental vocabulary acquisition (Xu, 2010).

The basic game concept is fairly simple. It is a ‘Quiz Challenge’ game, where players challenge Facebook friends or complete strangers to live five-question quizzes set at B1 or B2 levels of English on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale (Council of Europe, 2011). Points are earned for a correct answer, the faster the better. The main motivation to play is social, with several ways that a player can be challenged to a game. Various additional gamification features have been added like power boosters, coins earned, local and global league tables as well as learning friendly features like showing correct answers.

At the six-month point the high level stats seem impressive. 170,000 players from 192 countries. Two million games played – the top five users have all played over 10,000 games. But when digging deeper into the statistics a more nuanced story emerges. Despite the fairly constant 50,000 players or so active in the game in a given week, many are new, temporary arrivals. When analysing individual patterns of use, the vast majority of players stick with the game for less than a week. Only 12.8 percent of all players made it to the second week of play, and half that again to the third week. After that the usage stabilises, dropping by a much smaller percentage (7–15%) per week.

We extracted data on all 170,000 learners looking for patterns of use that would give insights into motivation and behaviours. We tried slicing by country, by content choice, by length of sustained play. Some headlines were:

Losing doesn’t demotivate: even the longest playing players had a fairly balanced win to lose ratio. As you would imagine, the players who had played the most games, also won more often, but even they still would lose almost as many as they would win.

Narrow topic choice: Despite a wide range of topics (nine) at two CEFR levels (B1 and B2), the vast majority of plays were in one of four topics (Studying, Going Out, Lifestyle, At Work) and stayed at B1.

Fast starters become long lasters: The players who lasted the longest all seemed to dive in fast, playing a high number of games per week right from the start. Those who played fewer games in the first week were much more likely to drop out sooner.

Veteran players challenge less often, but get challenged by others more. This may be due to their raised profile by being listed on leader boards.

Using lessons learned from the data, the Cambridge English team will be looking into the following:

1. Keep the early-leavers playing for longer:
   - Look at ways to nudge users during the first week. For example, auto-challenges, new topics.
   - Spread early stage points a little more, to incentivise replays.
   - Notification of position on local leader boards
2. Look deeper at use of gamification features. Can they be improved?
3. Add new incentives (for example, free online courses for top players)
4. Add new interaction types to broaden aspects of language we can test

Feedback from learners of the game has been very positive, and we look forward to improving it and rolling out more widely.
ARE YOU UP FOR IT?
UNDERSTANDING THE LEARNER BEHAVIOURS AND MOTIVATIONS IN QUIZ YOUR ENGLISH

REFERENCES


Teachers are mediators of the accelerating pace of educational and technological change. Or are they? Perhaps it is worth questioning assumptions that lie behind these statements, and the implications they have for our professional practice and identity. In this session we suggest that the discourse surrounding educational technologies is largely driven by historical and political ideologies that equate change and technological tools to bigger, better, fairer and more accessible education. This raises a number of very important questions in relation to what is actually ‘happening on the ground, and with what outcomes’ (Selwyn, 2014). The aim of this session is establish a model for professional practice that challenges ‘ideologically charged common sense’ (Friesen, 2008) and empowers teachers to identify, troubleshoot and protect their learning spaces from ‘problems masquerading as solutions’ (Selwyn, 2013).

Firstly, we look at the evidence of increasing pressure on teachers to adopt ICT in the classroom. Many schools and governing bodies now include ICT-specific criteria that are used for performance review and recruiting purposes. The question is whether these descriptors accurately reflect the complexities of educational technologies, and whether they provide teachers with enough scope to explore and investigate what best practice looks like in their contexts.

Secondly, we look at two action research projects that were conducted at our teaching centre in Hong Kong to explore the way classroom dynamics change when ICT is used in language learning. The first, conducted to evaluate Sugata Mitra’s pedagogical model of Self-Organised Learning Environments (SOLE), and the second used to compare the merits of new digital technologies (iPad apps) to traditional paper-based classroom tasks. Our observations are based on transcriptions of classroom interactions, and based on Chappell’s model (2014) for using classroom discourse as the basis for evaluating the merits of language learning tasks.

The premise of these projects is based on the belief that teachers undermine their own agency by avoiding classroom research. And as language teachers, we place particular importance on the medium of the classroom, and rich linguistic context that surrounds the classroom tasks we set our students. So, in this session we explore the realities of classroom discourse between students and teachers that emerge during ICT-based tasks and we consider things teachers and students can do to enhance their understanding of, and abilities to measure the difference between ‘state of the actual’ and ‘state of the art’ (Selwyn, 2011).

The primary conclusion from our own research identifies the need for teachers to adopt a more critical, but not resistant stance towards ICT pedagogies. This assumes that teachers will be engaged in exploring their own classroom contexts, and act as champions of their role as mediators of educational and technological change:

‘If spoken interactions .. are to be fully exploited for language learning, this ultimately requires direct, intentional and carefully staged teacher-mediated classroom behaviour.’ (Pengelley & Pyper, 2016)
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Recasts have been repeatedly shown to be the most commonly used form of feedback by language teachers (Lyster and Mori, 2006). However, despite this popularity, a significant amount of research (Lyster and Ranta 1997; Mackey et al, 2000) points to recasts being less effective than more explicit forms of feedback, such as metalinguistic feedback. A common argument against their effectiveness is that they frequently fail to be perceived as corrective by learners (Lyster 1998; Mackey et al, 2000; Sheen 2006).

Studies by Loewen and Philip 2006, and Sheen, 2006, investigated whether certain characteristics of recasts resulted in greater learner noticing. They found that recasts that were segmented, stressed and declarative, and therefore more explicit, were more likely to be perceived as corrective. Sheen (2007) interestingly found that a form of feedback combining a recast with metalinguistic information, termed metalinguistic correction, led to more L2 gains than traditional recasts.

There has been a growing interest in the utilization of text chat in language learning. Payne and Whitney (2002) viewed text chat practice as a ‘conversation simulator’ and Pellettieri (2000) found similar benefits for second language development as practice through oral interaction. Other benefits include greater participation (Kern, 1995), less use of L1 (Blake and Zyzik, 2003) more complex grammar attempted (Waarschauer, 1996), and positive take-up from students (Kitade 2000).

There is significant evidence (Lai and Zhao, 2006; Smith, 2004; Smith and Sauro, 2009) that communication via text chat can increase learner noticing of both language and interactional feedback for three reasons: turn-taking proceeds at a slower speed; language is written and thus more salient; learners can reread previous messages, notice mistakes and self-correct. However, despite these benefits, studies (Lai and Zhao, 2006; Sauro, 2009) measuring learner noticing of text chat recasts reported a similar failure of learners to perceive them as corrective.

During my MA TESOL I carried out a study examining ten EFL learners’ noticing of the corrective nature of hybrid recasts, a form of text chat feedback combining a recast of a grammatical error with metalinguistic information. Feedback was provided by a native-speaker interlocutor during two text chat activities: a spot-the-difference and picture-ordering task. Data was collected in two ways: analysis of task-based dyadic text chat interaction in which uptake was used as an indicator of learner noticing; a post-task questionnaire containing questions that identified evidence of learner noticing. Interaction analysis showed that learners responded to almost two thirds of the hybrid recasts with uptake. In addition, every learner provided evidence that they had correctly perceived at least some of the hybrid recasts as corrective in their post-task questionnaire responses.

Since moving to Singapore, I have given bi-monthly mixed-level text-chat classes. In these classes students perform text-chat tasks on TodaysMeet (an educational text chat tool), during which I provide hybrid recasts of grammatical and lexical errors. Feedback from questionnaires has revealed that the majority of students view the tasks as a positive addition to their English learning with many viewing the feedback provided as a key benefit.
INCREASING LEARNER NOTICING OF ERRORS AND FEEDBACK THROUGH TEXT CHAT

REFERENCES


‘Remote language teaching’ (RLT) is the practice of teaching a language live online through videoconferencing (VC). In Uruguay, the British Council is working in partnership with Plan Ceibal to cater for the lack of trained and qualified English language teachers in the country, project managing the remote teaching of 80,000 primary state schoolchildren aged 8 to 11. As a result, 95% of classes in urban schools of 4th, 5th & 6th grade of Primary now have English classes, with 73% of these students learning English through videoconferencing.

Remote teachers are based in Uruguay, Argentina, the Philippines and the UK and they use high-end VC equipment to teach 3,500 lessons per week to schools across the country, providing access to English to students who otherwise would not have the opportunity to learn the language.

The technology is used as a bridge between teacher and students and the teachers replicate as far as possible the interaction found in a face-to-face young learner lesson. In addition, the remote teacher (RT) works closely with a local classroom teacher (CT), who facilitates language practice after the weekly remote lesson is taught.

The use of technology in RLT is an example of applying technology to language teaching and learning with an eye to what Stephen Bax in 2011 called ‘normalisation’ i.e. the technology should as far as possible disappear, to become invisible. In Uruguay, when RLT works well, particularly when you have a skilled Remote Teacher (RT), we have observed that this is what happens. At times the students appear to forget that the teacher is not physically in the classroom.

In tandem with the teaching, research has been undertaken during the last two years, looking at the differences and similarities of remote teaching with face-to-face teaching, and exploring the impact on all areas of language teaching and learning. This includes:

- design and development of the curriculum, lesson plans and materials design.
- skills required by teachers and how that affects recruitment.
- continuous professional development (CPD).
- team teaching. For the programme to be effective, RT and CT need to work closely together. Data has been collected from RTs and CTs that shows best practice working as a team.
- managing online teaching quality. Teachers are observed and given support and guidance on improving the quality of their lessons.
- Assessment of students through a computer-based adaptive test. An annual test shows the results of those students learning online and face-to-face are similar.

After over four years of observations of teachers, surveys, data collection and constant improvement based on the findings, we have learned a lot about this form of teaching and learning. In this presentation, I will talk about the research, due to be published in 2018, and also discuss how these findings can be put into practice.

REFERENCES

This presentation is focused on the description of a university project called e-DACTA, which was specially designed for the introductory courses of the English Language courses of studies at the National University of La Plata (UNLP) in Argentina. One of the main e-DACTA objectives was to provide special scaffolding for those students who wish to become teachers of English and/or English-Spanish translators at UNLP. The level required to pass the introductory course is the CEFR B2 level; therefore, the online course has worked as a guide, which provides the academic knowledge required for the entrance course. The research belongs to the thesis dissertation called ‘La enseñanza de una lengua extranjera utilizando tecnología digital: Estudio descriptivo del tránsito de un material impreso a un entorno virtual de aprendizaje’ (ELT &LT: a Descriptive Study of the Transition from a Written Material to a Virtual Learning Environment) available here.

The e-DACTA online course has not only focused on the interaction among course participants and tutors but it has also facilitated the social presence which builds a sense of belonging to a group; a learning community which is so welcoming for students who come from other cities, provinces and countries to study at our Faculty. Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2005) in Shearer (2012) highlighted the importance of a community of enquiry that is built through the social presence in which participants ‘project themselves socially and emotionally as “real” people’ together with the teaching presence in reference to ‘the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes’, and with the cognitive presence (learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical community of inquiry). Course participants were provided with authentic and collaborative tasks that had been carefully designed to achieve the course learning goals facilitating the co-construction of linguistic knowledge.

In order to achieve the pedagogical objectives we had to cross a psychological and communicative approach; this ‘separation between student and teacher’ (Moore, 2012) was minimized through the participants’ interaction: ‘the more efficient the dialogic exchange, the lower the perceived distance in the educational transaction, and the possibility for miscommunication is reduced.’ (Shearer, 2012)

Participant’s presence and work turned visible through interaction triggered by meaningful tasks in the chat and forum spaces. The social presence categories mentioned by Garrison & Anderson (2005) such as Affective categories (expressions of emotions, humour and self-disclosure) flourished in the participants’ interaction driven by different motives: future course of studies expectations, anxieties, fears, uncertainty, insecurities, empathy, etc.

Our thesis conclusions were positive in reference to the use of technology fostering interaction in the online courses. We noticed that the most active participants were the ones that achieved successfully the course learning goals. Participant’s commitment and dedication were key factors in the distance course. It was through interaction that participants became visible and their learning outcomes were displayed.

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