The Future is Now: an Innovative E-learning Teaching Design

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Abstract

We will present an innovative approach to teaching and learning developed by the School of Education of Windesheim University of Applied Sciences (Zwolle,The Netherlands).This approach shows an excellent example for innovation in teaching methodologies in secondary and higher education. We are creating a didactic approach to learning, in which modern technology opens up all kinds of learning opportunities. The approach of our innovative teaching is applied to learning Mandarin Chinese, new at our language department. There are three target groups for this innovation; all teacher education departments, the teacher students and the schools where they will work as trainees and future employees.

Our model is innovative for distance learning and classroom teaching alike. The instructions on the E-learning platform are clear and short. Practice is only one click away! Various types of tools and links give access to direct and active learning. By means of self-assessment students monitor their own learning process. In the virtual world, in Second life, students meet natives, practice their language skills and acquire cultural knowledge. By means of innovative assignments students produce work in which they apply the acquired knowledge. Assignments are connected to real life. Learning becomes more meaningful. Both students and teachers learn of this technology. We will illustrate our model with practical examples from the pilots 'Mandarin Chinese language learning' we are currently running at Windesheim.

This innovative didactic method will help to change the future of education in Europe. It educates teachers and students at universities and schools alike. It is a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning, for multiple purposes. This innovative methodology links to other initiatives in this field like Life Long Learning projects such as Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition (TILA). By means of this innovation teaching and learning methodology further developments in the area of education will be stimulated.

1. Introduction

The Teacher Education Department of Windesheim University of Applied Sciences anticipates to new school subjects. Chinese has become a new school subject in the Netherlands. Teaching Chinese poses new challenges, because Chinese is seen as a very complicated language and therefore requires an adequate didactic approach. New interactive tools and practice opportunities in the virtual world have made an alternative didactic approach possible.

1.1 Approach

The approach is based on many years of practical experience in classroom teaching and E-learning at Windesheim. The course design was initiated by the department of secondary teacher education in cooperation with a Belgian Sinologist. The hypothesis is that the design will make learning Chinese more accessible and will lead to more motivation, more accurate pronunciation, more practical skills in language use, more endurance in studying and more pleasure in learning because of the diversity of the chosen learning methods. Through this specific approach we try to avoid an early drop out caused by learners' perceptions that learning Chinese finally turns out to be too difficult. It is an experimental educational design; evidence of the hypothesis will be based on the outcomes of the course.

2. This paper

In this paper we describe the target group, methodology, tools, and virtual world. We explain how the methodology can be used in classroom teaching as well as in distance learning. To verify the design we did a pilot to check the instructions and to test the specific assignments we created. The results of

the first pilot and the improvements thereafter to be tested in a second pilot will be described. We finalize the paper with our first conclusions.

2.1 Target group

The target groups are university students, in regular and distance learning courses, and school pupils, in secondary and in primary schools. Chinese is offered as an elective and as an enrichment subject in primary and secondary schools. Chinese will be taught at our university to provide these schools with qualified teachers. Because of the different target groups we created a teaching methodology to respond to the different needs.

2.2 Methodology

The methodology is based on three principles. Firstly, the learning platform guides the learner instead of the textbook. Secondly, the learning process of the learner in a rich environment is a focus point instead of the lecturer's teaching. Thirdly, learning is an interactive instead of a static process.
Principle one is that the learning platform organizes student's learning in a well-defined way; the instructions are on the platform in a specific sequence, students are referred to the textbook to read dialogues or to do exercises according to the instructions on the platform. The sequence is that students firstly learn the new vocabulary in a dialogue, secondly listen to the pronunciation, and thirdly learn how to pronounce the vocabulary with adequate sound and tone by video instruction and by a written explanation, guided by a short explanation about the grammar. The exercises referred to after the instructions are at the same time self-assessing; through the correction sheets or the self-correcting language games. There are specific assignments designed to apply the newly learned language; via the platform the learner communicates with his fellow students and teacher, posts his assignments and find feedback on his assignments. The design is a step-by-step approach, with supportive tools and tasks.
Principle two is that student's learning process is focus point instead of the lecturer's teaching. The rich environment using sound recordings, video tapes, games and the virtual world serves as a classroom, adapted to learners' needs and is more adjusted to the individual needs of today's learners. Besides, modern technology offers possibilities to organize group work in an efficient way, where involvement of each participant is visible.
The third principle is that learning is an interactive process; the students learn by trial and error. This approach changes teachers' and learners' roles. The learning platform with its direct instructions offers many opportunities for students to take this active learning role.

2.3 Tools

We selected tools that facilitate self-recording, self-production and self-assessment. No interference of the teacher is needed, the tools help to guide the learning process of the learner like students voice record their language production and post it on the learning platform where students as a group are asked to give feedback on each other's production or it is the lecturer that assesses student's production. For self-assessment we selected interactive language games that differentiate between Pinyin and characters, where the learner is able to connect sound to writing with a direct link to an interactive website. The combination of the different tools challenges each student to make repeated attempts at self-correction until a satisfactory –and satisfying– learning outcome is found; the learner is almost learning without 'noticing'.

2.4 Virtual world

The virtual world offers a near-native environment. A Chinese village serves as a 'classroom' situation for practice where fellow students can meet and, just as in a real class, can do language tasks together, supervised by their teacher. Another use of the virtual world is meeting with native speakers: learners are invited to use the virtual world for chatting –in Pinyin or in characters– as well as for speaking. It is an ideal way of making anonymous attempts to master complex structures. The virtual world is also used to realize specific language and culture tasks in the encounter with native speakers and serves as an 'experimental garden' for the exploration of one's own acquired listening and speaking skills.

The design is set up to provide distance learning but is also very effective for classroom teaching. Instructions are short and clear, explanations, examples and practice are one click away. The teacher moderates learning only with respect to the specific assignments designed for this purpose. For the classroom teacher this platform is an ideal point of departure. During the lessons the platform is the teacher's guidance to lead the learners through the learning materials. Only where specific instructions are needed can the teacher take as much time as needed to divagate, for the more common instructions the platform guides the students through their own learning process.

3 The pilot

In the pilot the objectives concerning the process and the learning outcomes were tested. The candidates to test the lessons consisted of both lecturers and students. These lessons were taken to serve as an example for the rest of the course design.

Firstly, the objectives of the process, secondly the objectives of the qualifying parameters will be explained and evaluated. Concerning the goals on the process, the data about the clarity of the course, objectives and procedures, lesson design, selected technology, self-correction material, portfolio and eliciting conversation between the lecturer and the students in order to evaluate the learning outcomes, were the items taken into account. With regard to the qualifying parameters of the design the data on study load and efficiency, learning outcomes and effectiveness, practical use with regard to feeling more skilled and encouraged to speak, intrinsic motivation and sensing that acquiring the learning content was easier, were the data to be analysed.

The candidates were very positive about the composition of the course. The instructions were clear, the tasks easy to accomplish and the time needed for a lesson acceptable. The sequence in which the learning skills were organized as well as that the platform was leading instead of the textbook, were regarded as efficient, although those candidates that did not read the instructions carefully, did not fully understand this approach. The candidates felt motivated by the variety of the tools. The specific assignments as making sound recording and small movies and uploading them on the learning platform were not regarded as to be too difficult for the students. For the lecturers these aspects posed more difficulties. Getting Second life installed seemed to be difficult when laptops were not updated or older than three years. Another operating system than Windows posed some difficulties. Also in using Second life –moving, talking and finding places– was in the beginning challenging enough; therefore some of candidates were not yet very successful in doing the specific assignments on Second life. Furthermore the correction sheets for self-assessment were valued to be very helpful and the variety of means to explain the content –sound, YouTube films and written descriptions– were appreciated. As for to learning outcomes, during the encounters on Second life certain skills became visible: candidates disguised as avatars tried to test their newly learned knowledge by chatting in Pinyin and in characters, using the newly learned vocabulary. Instead of doing the tasks, the candidates were just attempting what they had learned, but this proved to be useful as well. The teacher of the course, as well disguised as an avatar, needed some time to become aware that she had to take her role as a teacher in the Chinese village at Second life. In the eliciting conversation about the portfolio and the learning progress by means of Skype, the teacher could use what she had noticed during encounters on Second life. Also the collection of candidate's work –work posted by the candidates on the learning platform and provided with feedback by the teacher as well as saved conversation on Second life– gave proof of candidate's progress.

Although it was a short and limited pilot, analysing the qualifying parameters gave some insights on the effect of the educational design. The candidates indicated that studying Chinese through this platform seemed to be efficient, they appreciated the possibilities to practice their language skills by Second life, and they commented that learning was easier and more fun. They felt motivated to practice but some were not sure that speaking through the medium of Second life helped them to feel freer to speak and to make mistakes. The pilot was too short to define whether they achieved better learning outcomes, and to conclude that learning was more profound. As for self-regulation and defining their own study tempo, another issue arose. Although a certain study attitude of the candidates –in this case students and lecturers in language studies– was to be expected, i.e. knowing that learning a language requires repetitive action, this was not an automatic reaction; apparently this should be regulated by a weekly schedule.

4. Conclusion

As result of the pilot we come to the following conclusions: we succeeded in designing a methodology that is modern, attractive and motivating for learning Chinese. Learning Chinese became more accessible by means of the various tools and Second life learning. The way of learning was appreciated and seemed to be efficient. However, we must invest more time in supporting the candidates in the preliminaries of the course in order that the course can be properly used. Therefore we have made a few adjustments. Firstly, as a result of the technical issues there will be written a manual specifically for Apple computers, students will be advised to use proper laptops, we will design checklist for the candidates in order to check themselves, meant to be a second check for the candidates before they come to the kick off meeting. Secondly, we will design a 'lesson zero' for the candidates to get them acquainted with the tools and use of Second life.

Thirdly, we decided to adjust the first assignments because of the time needed to get acquainted to the use of Second life; the tasks for speech will become a means to use Second life instead of being a main goal. Fourthly, we must be more explicit at the kick off meeting that the learning platform is leading and not the textbook; although this is described at 'course information'. Fifthly, the teacher needs more specific training on being a moderator on a distance learning device.

After the adjustments we will expand the experimental phase to secondary education, to learn whether the design will proof to be supportive for learning Chinese at secondary schools, either as a course in itself, or as supplementary material to classroom teaching. The results of this pilot will lead to the final design. This approach opens up new possibilities in teaching languages and other subjects alike. The future is now!

References

[1] L. Stomp, head of Secondary Teacher Education Department, initiator: M. Rijbroek, senior consultant modern foreign languages (Windesheim), course design: V. Verschelden, Sinologist, head Department of Foreign Languages (Het Perspectief, Ghent, Belgium), Wim Trooster, Hans Selles and Erik Ploeger, School of Education (Windesheim).

[2] Pinyin means composed sound and is a Latin transcription of the sounds of Mandarin Chinese.