Collaborative, Digital Learning to Empower Students' Academic Writing Skills

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Abstract

Experience in an institutionalized learning environment shows a considerable number of indicators that call for a more sensitive way of teaching. Particularly in advanced English courses with special focus on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at the WIFI/Styria, learning is often hindered by a large number of personal factors that mainly revolve around negative prior experience exposed to language learning and their negative effects on the learners' self-image (learner's anxiety, low student self-esteem and insufficient language skills to keep up with course content and colleagues, etc.). Given these circumstances, the call for a more in-depth approach for teachers to deal with affective and personal issues of adult language learners led to the development of a course design to empower students' academic writing skills through digital, collaborative learning.

The overall aim of this design is to react to current problems in EAP courses by generating a framework that incorporates the pedagogical, didactic and technological dimensions. This is illustrated by the EAP course design in which pedagogical and didactic orientation reacts to the predominance of negative affections towards learning by 1) creating a low anxiety learning environment and by 2) learning objectives that reflect Krathwohl's cognitive and affective domain. On a broader scale, the concept behind this EAP course is rooted in social-constructivist learning theory with implicit and explicit attributes assigned to the teacher (acting as mediator and facilitator/ cognitive apprenticeship) and the learner (acting as a self-regulated person operating in a social, collaborative learning environment). This course design is based on the assumption that collaborative learning helps to reduce learners' anxiety through the usage of technology- and web-based group projects. It is furthermore built upon the fundamental claim that digital, collaborative learning does not only create a strong sense of belonging with fellow colleagues and generate positive, affective ties, but also considers technology- and web-based learning environments beneficial for self-regulated, explorative learning with little to no teacher surveillance or control.

1. Social-constructivism in EAP

Constructivism in itself has developed many different strands and orientations, whereas the social constructivist orientation [13] seems to be most appropriate for educational contexts and language learning in particular. This course design refers to a concept of learning as a social, interactive process where knowledge is actively (de-/re-) constructed in a social environment and learning initiatives are triggered by stimuli and irritation from others. Learning is, thus, an active process of constructing knowledge and meaning in constant interaction with each other. From an educational perspective, this concept of learning calls for collaborative and self-regulated learning where social interaction, negotiation and consensus finding are important elements. "From a constructivist point of view, learning is a self-regulated, constructive, cognitive and emotional activity, determined by a person's biography and serving her survival."[10]

1.1 Self-regulated learning

In a narrow sense of the term, self-regulated learning enables the learner to actively participate in his/her own learning processes and determine the parameters of one's own learning. This is achieved by passing the personal control of the learning process onto the learner. Zimmermann/Schunk [14] show that self-regulated learning enables learners to "set better learning goals, implement more effective learning strategies, monitor and assess their goals better, establish a more productive environment for learning, seek assistance more often when it is needed, expend effort and persist better, adjust strategies better, and set more effective new goals when present ones are completed." [14] The benefit of self-regulated learning lies in the acquisition of personal, metacognitive skills to regulate, monitor and evaluate own learning outcomes that are very helpful for language learning. But the capacity of self-reflection as such is advantageous for life in general [1;2]. In the context of adult language learning in institutionalized environments, the dimension of life-long-learning and learning for

life is a very crucial one; this undermines the necessity to apply concepts of learning such as the above-described self-regulated learning orientation in adult learning contexts, which the present course design is an example of.

The incorporation of self-generated learning strategies in adult EAP courses is manifested with reference to research and a few selected pedagogical suggestions by Harris/Lindner/Pinar [6] on how to promote self-regulated learning in online environments: 1) Learners define goals and write specific action plans for how to achieve them, 2) Learners keep a learning journal, 3) Learners respond to self-monitoring prompts and 4) Learners self-evaluate their learning by taking progress checks and quizzes.

Whereas the first two tasks demand active learners' engagement in personal language learning processes and their individual advancement, the last two tasks implicitly refer to the role of the teacher in generating study questions, quizzes, progress checks, etc. They are provided virtually on the LMS and serve as personal, non-graded feedback. Self-monitoring prompts [6] might serve as an initial trigger for the learning journal entries and progress checks, quizzes, etc. can be interpreted as a way of giving learners a non-formal form of assessment concerning their individual skills. From a constructivist perspective, these external impacts maintain the function of perturbating the ongoing learning mechanisms in the learners' mind and serve as a stimulus for individual learning and therefore, incorporate a vital element of fostering constructive learning.

1.2 Collaborative learning

The term collaborative learning occurs "when learners are encouraged to achieve common learning goals by working together rather than with the teacher and when they demonstrate that the value and respect of each other's language input. Then, the teacher's role becomes one of facilitating these goals." [9]. In addition, collaborative learning refers to learning as a social, interactive group process to accomplish shared goals while maximizing their own and the group members' achievements [7]. Online collaborative learning has undergone a great upward trend, especially with the Internet as a constant and immediate medium to communicate, share, work and learn collaboratively in synchronous and asynchronous ways, in written or spoken words, internationally and worldwide.

Collaborative learning in adult EAP courses focuses on the benefit of group projects on better academic achievement than individualistic learning and considers the interactive dimension both in class and in virtual cooperation, meetings, chats, etc. to generate shared artefacts communally accessible via the LMS of the institution. Learners are encouraged to operate in group projects to collaboratively generate a piece of academic writing that corresponds to the criteria discussed in class.

2. The course design

Based on blended learning principles with collaborative and self-study periods of one's own choice, the EAP course design is divided into three phases: first, an opening and welcoming phase introducing the course aims and learning procedures, stating the relevance of collaborative and self-regulated learning for individual and group achievement and carrying out a (technical and administrative) introduction to a digital learning environment (LMS, free open-source Web tools, etc.). Second, there is an input phase of specific course material carried out and checked by the teacher in class that follows the steps of cognitive apprenticeship: Modeling, scaffolding, fading and coaching. Based on research that claims the benefits of cognitive apprenticeship for improving writing skills [4;5], various writing strategies are explained and applied to facilitate and effectuate academic composition. These strategies contain information on academic language mechanisms (advanced syntax, vocabulary, grammar, etc.) as well as individual writing strategies divided into the planning, drafting, revision and editing stages of the writing process. To allow individuals to construct their own meaning through applying and questioning the language input, learners work individually before they are engaged in their group projects.

EAP course material will be applied in class on three levels of academic writing (the conceptual level of academic texts, the language and grammatical particularities of academic texts and the academic register and academic stance). Groups consist of three learners, where each has one assigned role aligned to the three levels of EAP course content. The group works collaboratively on a Wiki-generated piece of academic writing where the topic, type and length are subject to collective agreement and goal setting. Group projects also have to fulfill learning tasks that are based on information gaps or master-apprentice relationship where each learner is assigned to one of the three particular language areas to specialize in. This assigned expert role will be relevant in-class in the form of collaborative group presentations and virtually outside of the classroom for monitoring language learning processes and giving peer feedback. This phase of effectuating composition calls for time to practice and reflect and could therefore take up the majority of the scheduled course time.

Between the in-class meetings, there are blended learning phases where technology-based and web-based tools are in constant use. Learners continue to work 1) collaboratively and cyclically on their artefacts (Wikis, Google docs, etc.) and 2) reflect, self-mirror and self-assess their learning process. The latter is triggered by teacher-generated stimuli provided digitally on the LMS of the course in the form of quizzes, study questions, questionnaires, etc. to promote creative, reflective thinking as a form to influence an individual's learning process. To stimulate interaction and a more in-depth discussion of the three EAP course levels, learners with the same language task will meet in joint on- and/or offline meetings in synchronous or asynchronous communication channels (provided via the LMS). The final phase is dedicated to discussing the collaborative products (the final review of group projects and peer and teacher feedback) and reflecting the self-regulated learning advancement (learning journals, personal goal setting and achievement) in class meetings. The last phase closes by combining the two major orientations of learning: the collaborative and self-regulated dimensions. Achieved obstacles make advancement in learning visible and concrete for learners.

2.1 The role of the technology for collaborative and self-regulated learning

Digital learning, here, serves as a way and method to communicate and discuss course material virtually outside of class. This is of great importance since especially the assignment to generate a written piece of academic writing calls for collaborative, joint effort. A technologically enhanced learning environment provided by a language management system represents a vital basis for this to happen. The digital channels provided by the LMS of the institution are an essential contribution in this matter and are completed by more web-based digital communication tools for collaborative writing (especially Wikis, Google docs, etc.) to be able to generate 1) academic composition and 2) self-reflective learning journals.

2.2 The role of the teacher

This course design shows a very high degree of self-regulated and collaborative learning in- and outside of class and consequently demands an extensive use of digital learning tools. With the help of digital support, the course design shows a considerable shift from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness. The constructivist orientation is strongly present by putting the teacher in the position of facilitating and mediating learning processes of individuals and groups. The teacher's role comprises three major functions: 1) initiating and accompanying learning processes through cognitive apprenticeship, 2) giving immediate and continuous feedback on language and learning processes (on- and offline) and 3) creating a positive and low-anxiety course design. The latter is achieved by the vigorous implementation of digital media in a collaborative setting and based on Bennet's implications for collaborative digital learning [3]:
Include a variety of opportunities for collaboration
Provide an array of tools and allow students to choose
Help students to develop effective online communication skills
Encourage a mix of face-to-face and online communication

Additionally, creating a low-anxiety learning atmosphere will be achieved with reference to interventions of the study of the Greek Open University [11]. Some implications for practice can be considered to be essential for effectuating collaborative writing skills [11] and are therefore relevant in EAP course design :1) project work as a way to involve students personally, increase motivation and communication without the feeling of being constantly observed or assessed, 2) establishing a learning community and a supportive classroom atmosphere, 3) setting up classroom rules and norms negotiated between learners and teachers, 4) teacher immediacy where verbal and non-verbal immediacy behavior can reduce anxiety and positively influence the motivation to learn.

2.3 The role of anxiety and pedagogical implications

Experience in adult language learning claims a predominant role of anxiety as a matter of personal incompetence and the relevance of negative and harmful beliefs about language learning deeply rooted in the language learner's self-image and prior experience. Anxiety research proposes a vast array of techniques and strategies that aim at creating a low-anxiety classroom to deal with this issue adequately. Whereas some research calls for an overt way of overcoming personal language anxiety (anxiety graphs, agony column, anxious photos) [12], this paper adopts a more goal-oriented approach. Instead of articulating and discussing personal anxiety in class by working with visual or verbal cues, learners' anxiety, their low self-esteem and limiting beliefs about learning a language are tackled by a conscious, pedagogical shift away from the problematic source to the desired, positive emotional state. Especially in the context of affections and emotions, learners need to experience and

feel the difference in class to eventually reshape thoughts, ideas, and beliefs about language learning in the present days. The affective domain is, however, an important element that is well incorporated in the course design in the form of learning objectives and premises for the teacher. Learning objectives are based on Krathwohl's learning taxonomy [8] and also show in (addition to a cognitive orientation) a large focus on affective learning objectives tailored to the concept of collaborative and self-directed learning as one way of empowering learners' personal and language skills. The affective domain is tackled by fostering a strong commitment to collaboratively working in groups and on projects where group members possess particular tasks and roles. The assessment of affective learning objectives is carried out through joint discussions and reflections in teacher-student and student-student interactions in the final phase of the course design.

3. Conclusion

This EAP course design reacts to current challenges in teaching EAP writing skills in adult education. As anxiety seems to be a prime source of complication, this course design was generated and embedded into a theoretical framework of pedagogical, didactic and technical issues. It centers on the predominant role of the teacher in fostering learning processes through cognitive apprenticeship, creating a low-anxiety atmosphere and a persistent use of digital media involvement to promote collaborative and self-regulated learning. The course design operates in three major phases and describes a didactic scenario for the perspectives described above on learning, strategies for improving EAP writing skills and interventions to reduce anxiety in language learning by referring to conceptual literature. Digital media involvement is vital for this concept and is vigorously incorporated to maximize the benefit from joint learning processes and effort in order to reduce anxiety and empower academic writing skills. This didactic scenario is a first theoretical attempt to address critical issues; further observation and feedback from real-life teaching might be necessary to fine-tune the design and guarantee ongoing progress.

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