Exploring the Potential of Dialogical and Trialogical Systems in Language Learning: Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 Applications in FL Writing Proficiency Courses

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Abstract

The socio-constructivist approach has made a significant contribution to computer assisted language learning through its focus on peer collaboration and negotiation of meaning (cf. e.g. Beatty 2003). The present paper shows how these insights can be applied to foster advanced foreign language (FL) writing skills. Based on our experience with FL writing proficiency courses in Flemish higher education, we discuss two practical applications of virtual learning environments (VLEs). Using terms from Paavola / Hakkarainen (2005), the first may be described as “dialogical”, the second as “trialogical”, with wikis being the collaboratively created objects. Both types turn out to be useful in order to promote a closer integration of private and educational communication in the lives of “digital natives” studying a foreign language.

Our first project centred on e-mail tandem partnerships between Flemish majors of FL German and a group of L1 German peers taking a course on teaching German as a FL. The collaboration consisted mainly of the German group’s feedback on the Flemish students’ texts (descriptive, deliberative, persuasive). Communication was conducted both via a VLE and e-mail. The Flemish students documented the collaboration process, drafts and final results of their texts in a portfolio. Problems encountered had to do with the difference in term dates between the two institutions, with a lack of teaching experience on the part of the German students, and with the fact that they did not know the Ghent students’ L1, Dutch (making it difficult to diagnose L1 interference in the latter’s errors); intercultural misunderstandings also occurred, caused by differing interpretation of irony.

Our second project consisted in the joint creation of German FL wikis within groups of Flemish bachelor students. They collaboratively created wikis on recent “Words of the Year” of German-speaking countries, keeping in mind their peers’ background knowledge. Besides peer-collaboration, peer-revision also played an important role, as the groups provided mutual feedback on their wiki’s. We will present samples of wiki pages and peer feedback, and also highlight a few conclusions concerning the (rather divergent) appreciation of the project by the students as expressed in a post-hoc questionnaire.

Both our applications demonstrate how the computer literacy acquired in private communication can be integrated into the teaching of FL writing in different ways. An obvious strength of the trialogic approach is that it allows teachers and learners to focus on writing processes (Kárpáti 2009, 144). Since wikis also enable researchers to track the creation process, they can lead to new insights into the FL writing process and the negotiation involved in collaborative writing in general. On the other hand, applying Web 2.0 projects in higher education also implies new challenges to the institutional framework, from hard- and software through teacher training to curricula flexibility.