

Enhancing Young Male Learners' Motivation for Language Learning

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Abstract

At a time when mass education system predominates on all levels throughout Europe, it is necessary to acknowledge that everyone is unique and, thus, learns differently. As such, the European Project Love Language and More (under the Leonardo Da Vinci program) proposes to address the uniqueness of young male learners within a language learning context and implement, culturally adapt and test a developed Handbook and a Toolbox to offer language course providers and their trainers and tutors an appealing approach for young male language learners by introducing learning contents which we believe reflect male interests.

This paper seeks to present the results of the implementation and cultural adaptation process of the language learning methodologies and activities proposed by the Portuguese partners of the Love Language and More Project and address and discuss young male learner's reactions to ICT-based activities within the Language Learning Classroom.

1. Introduction

Investigations exploring gender effects on young adult foreign language learning unanimously state the fact that language uptake is imbalanced between men and women and that language courses usually have a larger proportion of female participants. In addition to this, for years, gender and language learning studies have revealed that young men find language learning to be uninteresting, clearly demonstrating differences in terms of motivation and participation [1-5]. Consequently, research has sought to unveil the reasons for the lack of motivation and participation in order to provide language teachers with the necessary insights to actively overcome these issues, which, in today's globalized world is cause for great concern as it leads to reduced participation in a wider society, reduced access to information, reduced chances on the European labour market. Although the research design and methodologies are the same for the partnership, in this paper we will focus on the Portuguese results.

2. The Project – Love Language & More¹

Considering the above-mentioned scenario, a European project entitled Love Language & more! Attract Participation and Increase Motivation of Young Male Language Learners was designed. Some innovation providers in the area were identified and a project under the Leonardo da Vinci program, transfer of innovation was developed. The overall purpose of the project is to enable young male adults with particular "foreign language learning resistance" to establish their "love for language" by increasing their interest and uptake of foreign languages and to increase their participation in the lifelong learning society.

In order to achieve this objective, it is the project's intention to transfer the results of two prior innovative language projects: Love Language Plus! Attract Participation and Increase Motivation of

¹ For further information see project's website <http://www.love-language-more.eu/index.php/>

Young Male Language Learners² (Grundtvig project from Czech Republic) and Talk with me! The Social way to Learn a Language³ (KA2 project from the Slovenia and Slovakia), to other European countries, among them, Portugal.

Furthermore, the current project intends to update the contents of the previous Toolbox and Handbook, focusing on the use of ICT for Language Learning. The main outcomes of the project will be an updated and culturally adapted pedagogical Handbook for teachers and trainers, a Toolbox with validated exercises, suggestions on how to use Second Life for oral Language Learning.

The added value of the project relies on the diversity of the suggestions presented that seek to contradict the motivational and participatory resistance of young male language learners.

The project, which began in November of 2010 and has the duration of 18 months, counts on the support of different European institutions: WIN - Wissenschaftsinitiative Niederösterreich (Austria), KTP - Společnost pro kvalifikaci na trhu práce (Czech Republic), INTEGRA, Inštitut za razvoj človeških virov (Slovenia), Univerza v Mariboru (Slovenia), Občianske združenie "Šanca pre ľudí tretieho veku" (Slovakia) and Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto (Portugal).

3. Research Design and Methodologies

The first step to accomplish the objectives mentioned above was to develop a framework analysis to encompass several topics, namely: 1) description of the countries' education system, educational policies and programs, conditions for reaching disadvantaged target groups and motivating them to learn; 2) population characterization by education level/gender and unemployment/gender/education level; 3) language learning policies, language learning places and languages being taught in each of the partner countries involved. Thus, in order to complete this initial task, the Portuguese partners of the project began with a literature review, which focused on the analysis of official European documents with reference to Portuguese data, as well as Portuguese governmental documents and statistics. Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of Portuguese language learning institutions was conducted via Internet, telephone and personalized contacts.

The second step was to contact the target group - young male student, for the purpose of this project considered between the ages of 16 and 27 - and language teaching experts. A short online questionnaire, made up of 10 multiple-choice questions using LimeSurvey, was made available online and emails were sent to learning institutions spread throughout the country soliciting dissemination among the students. The purpose was to identify eventual problems young male students connect to language learning as well as to understand their perceived motivational factors.

Finally and in order to better identify the problems, challenges and difficulties felt by teachers when teaching young (16-27) male learners, 5 level 3, level 4 and level 5 foreign language teachers were interviewed. Our in-depth interviews intended to assess and differentiate the problems within the LL class in terms of gender and how teachers cope within the classroom. Furthermore, we wanted to understand how contents and exercises are selected and understand the role of ICT. How students are motivated is also a fact that was analyzed in order to know the root of some of the problems.

The results obtained were the basis for Portuguese language teaching experts to culturally adapt the existing products from the previous projects. The cultural adaptation of the exercise Toolbox included not only a reformulation of the exercises, but also the creation of new exercises, consistent with the technological evolution. Furthermore, the pedagogical Handbook was reassessed based on a literature review encompassing the last 2 years (2009-2011).

² For further information see project's website <http://www.love-language.org/>

³ For further information see project's website <http://www.talk-with-me.eu/>

4. Results

4.1 Framework Analysis

Through our research, we were able to acknowledge that in Portugal there is no specific policy related to foreign language teaching, in particular. Although we were able to find general references to the importance of foreign language learning within the European context, no specific data was found.

In higher education, universities and polytechnic schools have the autonomy to develop their own methodologies, giving their teachers the necessary freedom to use the teaching strategies they feel that are most suitable for their students. Portuguese Higher Education institutions have "statutory, educational, scientific, cultural, administrative, financial, property and disciplinary autonomy", as states Article 5^o, Law n^o 1/2003, of January 6th. It is possible that some institution may have internal policies; however, we were not able to find them through the desktop research carried out. This absence of a common policy could mean that each school, each course, can offer whatever they want.

4.2 Student Questionnaire

An online questionnaire, composed of 10 multiple-choice questions using LimeSurvey, was made available online to male students, between the ages of 16 and 27 to identify eventual problems young male students connect to language learning as well as to understand young male learners' perceived motivational factors. 358 questionnaires were validated.

Despite of the idea that young male learners don't like to learn languages, the results in our study show that the majority of the respondents like learning languages, although not loving it. Only 6,15% of the respondents claimed to "not like" or to "hate" language learning. They also consider that teachers should "combine different teaching styles", focusing on ICT-based activities such as: "PC activities with Internet access" (22,63%), "virtual environments (e.g. Second Life)" (7,26%), "social applications (e.g. Facebook)" (10,06%), among others.

4.3 Teacher Interviews

In-depth interviews to 5 foreign language teachers were carried out. We intended to assess and differentiate the problems within the LL class in terms of gender and how teachers cope within the classroom. When questioned, all acknowledged a difference in participation and motivation within the LL class in terms of gender. One teacher reinforced the idea that there is also a clear difference in terms of age group, meaning that, older active workers who decide to learn a foreign language are mainly male, while female learners dominate the 16-25 age group.

In general, these teachers think that young females show more interest in class, are more attentive, persistent and hard-working. Young male learners, on the other hand are more easily distracted, are more competitive and less participative.

All teachers interviewed clearly identify specific contents where boys show more interest in. They all agreed that young male learners prefer practical situations which involve sports, work, computers while young female learners prefer more subjective matters, often related to fashion and romance.

The teachers claim to follow guidelines either defined by the government, by the coordinating teacher (in Higher Education, for example), or following a students' book as the main reference. All agreed that the use of information technology, such as videos and other online resources contribute greatly to learners' motivation and interest, especially if the resources are diversified. Finally, all teachers were open to implement new themes and exercises.

4.4 Product Adaptation

The product adaptation phase sought to adapt relevant on-line course contents from the products of the original projects and adjust and modify them according to current needs and requirements, as well as linguistic and social conditions. They were also expected to take into account different learning cultures in the partner countries.

As such, all the partners of this project thoroughly discussed each previous exercise in the Toolbox. It was decided that several exercises needed to be updated and modified, while others simply needed to be eliminated and replaced by new exercises resulting from the framework analysis, interviews with teachers and student questionnaires. Most exercises are ICT based, as results show that male learners are aware of the benefits of using ICT in learning language and perceived themselves as having a positive attitude towards ICT-related activities/exercises. Language teachers however, acknowledge students' lack of proficiency in certain ICT-related skills, especially in terms of content creation.

5. Future work

The validation phase will be the project's next step. Portuguese language teaching experts will once again be contacted in order to obtain feedback as to the new Handbook. Furthermore, they will be asked to randomly pick exercises from the Toolbox to implement in their language courses. The feedback on the new Handbook and the results of the implementation process will be analyzed and, if necessary, a new adaptation phase will follow.

Conclusions

The Portuguese partners of the Love Language and More project conclude that, in terms of language learning policies, as these seem to be nonexistent, professional organizations on foreign language learning need to collaborate with each other, to establish common goals and policies in order to achieve a prominent role in educational circles.

Questionnaire analysis allows to conclude that the percentage of respondents that don't enjoy learning languages is not as high as was initially expected. The constant reference to ICT-based learning strategies on the learners' behalf, lead us to believe that interactivity (using computers, electronic devices, on-line widgets, and so on) in the classroom motivates young male learners, as this allows the student to participate and control their own learning activity.

In this sense, the teacher who searches to interact with his/her students is proposing knowledge, creating problems, suggesting routes, mobilizing the collective experience, and on the other hand, the student drifts into an active role that allows him/her to enjoy what is being thought. It is important that male learners be given opportunities to express themselves creatively within the learning environment established by the teacher.

In terms of teachers, our interviews reveal that experts rely on the guidelines given by their superiors and implement these in class, disregarding the student as a unique individual. Teachers still look at the class as a whole and implement group strategies that clearly do not contemplate the scientific differences between gender, which, surprisingly teachers acknowledge but fail to address.

Thus we believe will never make significant progress on language learning problems young male learners face unless we dedicate ourselves as teachers first to discovering what holds their interests. The challenge is then to find ways to, within established policies and curricula, meet these interests aware of their need to preserve their sense of masculinity in a female-[2]dominated area.



Finally, both teachers and students acknowledge that although ICT per se is not self-determining, the way the activities are implemented tend to engage and foster greater male learner motivation and participation, as ICT is a medium they identify themselves with, pay attention to and enjoy using.

References

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