

From a Teaching/Learning Experiment to Establishing a New Set of Best Practices in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

This paper aims at presenting the way forward of an experiment which took place four years ago, how learners and teachers have adapted to new learning environments involving ICT over these four years. This will show how despite a lot of reluctance, a small team of enthusiastic teachers has paved the way to introducing ICT in Second language acquisition in the classroom. Thus, fostering the need to change some of our teaching-learning practices to which many colleagues have now a growing awareness. This paper is here to present how within our language department we organized our training to help our colleagues meet the new standards which have commonly been agreed to. This slow but yet inevitable process is an essential foothold to creating the conditions that - even more than before - we are engaged in a never-ending continuing process where the learner is at the centre of the learning/teaching system. However, theory is not practice; many obstacles had and still have to be overcome. There are some questions which still need to be answered. This learning/teaching strategy we believe in needs to be set within a clear and strong political framework, where decision-makers have to be convinced of the benefits of such a scheme. Cultural and financial barriers are to be broken down. Our language department now provides language courses involving blended learning and distance learning which are beneficial to our students whether they are face-to-face or distant. We will present a learning/teaching model designed for a distance language course catering for the needs of mostly mature students in the field of psychology and who have compulsory ECTS credits in English. This teaching/learning model is a concrete example of the way forward we had decided to follow four years ago.

1. Introduction

This paper is here to present the way forward of an experiment which took place four years ago, how learners and teachers have adapted to new learning environments involving ICT. Over the last several years ICT has entered our lives in such an important way that as an individual we have been constantly adapting ourselves to it, sometimes even without knowing it. Well, in the education world it should be the same. However, as an educator or teacher strangely such adaptation is more difficult to achieve. There are many reasons to this, paradigms which have built our knowledge and ways of teaching may tend to cause some kind of fossilization in our practices and ways of how we relate to the common idea that we are the vector of passing on knowledge and that our pedagogical practices are deeply rooted in that idea or belief. The speed required to update to technology can also impede our willing to adapt to new practices. The overall work environment also has an impact on change, institutions with their momentum and sometimes unclear ICT policies also refrain practices to evolve. Therefore, it took us some time and persuasion to create the proper conditions for such awareness. Paving the path to the evolution of our teaching learning techniques and practices has brought us to reconsider some aspects of our work as educator or teacher and led us to several language learning systems, one of which is presented in this paper.

1.1 The rationale

The CLM is a university facility composed of 3 main entities of which one is our department. It is a university language centre which provides courses for students who are non-specialists in languages but have a compulsory English course with ECTS credits attached to it. We also are an open language centre catering for the needs of any individual within the context of Long Life Learning. In France, when it comes to languages, a majority of our learners admit they have difficulties learning a foreign language. Without entering the controversial issue of English being seen as hegemonic and monolithic, it is a reality that the main language taught at our university is English whether it is in higher education or further education and that we are far from the official expectations when it comes to language acquisition. The Bologna process was the starting point to our need to reorganize and rethink the different syllabi to meet the new objectives (bring as many BA students to the B2 level (CEF). Thus we developed and implemented a pedagogical policy offering courses set within different learning systems ranging from full distant online courses to blended or face-to-face courses [1] Agbessi et al, 2007. As we went along the main question for staff was how our distance language learning models impact on our learners? We were faced with interesting data from different surveys carried out among learners which brought us, if not to reconsider the way we had designed and implemented our models, to adapt our practices and teaching/learning approaches. From there onwards, we have designed several learning systems.

1.2 From blended learning to distant learning-teaching: the model

Our ICT platform is based on Claroline an open source eLearning and eWorking platform set within the institution's Virtual Learning Environment which has allowed us to build online language courses and to manage learning and collaborative activities on the web. Each student has access to his or her English course which constitutes a learning path containing different modules, tutorials, forums and an email address in case of problems. The students also attend a one-hour face-to-face class to get information about all the ICT services they can find at the university (wifi, e-mail, digital working environment, educational resources, and timetable). Our learning model is designed around different modules catering for the needs of students over a range of CEFR levels from A2 to C1. Each module is based on a topical course content organized in a linear way for A2 learners along with a remedial pedagogical course unit to a more task-based approach for levels ranging from B1 to C1. The remedial capsules are based on tutorials or animated power point presentations along with printable grammar files. A number of transversal/multidisciplinary skill-based modules related to a more operational approach of the language are also provided to the learners (telephoning techniques, oral presentation techniques and so forth) (Agbessi et al, 2008). However, over the last 2 years, surveys given to the students showed that if they were reasonably satisfied with the courses that were provided to them, the main claim was about the importance of human contact. Therefore, if such claim might be understandable for online and distance learning, it was rather surprising for blended courses. Hence, the hypothesis that proper information and dissemination on the goals and expectations of these courses were perhaps to improved by the pedagogical and administrative staff.

2. The teaching-learning system

Considering this assumption, we redefined our learning model for one particular course addressing the needs of mostly mature students in the field of psychology and who have compulsory ECTS credits in English. We set up a learning system which was completely rethought from a total online distance learning system to a more guided one. This system is based on the approach which focuses on the participative and reflective aspects of learning, constructing meaning and systems with the focus on

the learner instead of the teacher. In our quest to equip students for independent and lifelong learning, the trend towards this model could only be seen to be advantageous to the learner in an environment wherein they have to be able to respond to training needs and adopt independent learning skills.

Therefore, we designed a learning system taking into account these principles. Accompaniment and guidance [2], [3], [4] (Puren, 2004, p. 249; Pothier, 2004; Demaiziere, 1991, p. 569) in the first stages of the course are essential. It is important to create a protected environment, the fact that each student will have a teacher as guide is the added value which enables them to feel safer in their learning situation. The use of applications such as skype or being part of a learning community using social networks will also contribute to enhancing their capacity to learn, to communicate in the language. However, acquiring operational skills with software such as Skype or using Facebook pages is relatively easy in theory, but the lack of hands-on sessions renders the first stages more difficult especially for learners (important number of mature students) who are not necessarily used to such environments. Therefore, we have decided to provide for this year two face-to-face sessions acting as an induction lesson at the beginning of each term and for those who would not be able to attend these sessions, they will be filmed and will be made accessible on the university's Virtual Learning Environment.

The course is designed around different modules which all have a task component. Each task triggers collaborative and communicative activities which are then carried out by the learners asynchronously (dedicated forum) or synchronously (skype or google talk). Then a written production is sent by email to the teacher (there are 4 written productions sent to the teacher according to a common agreed timetable for correction and comments). Throughout the course there are also four conversations with a teacher using the most convenient means of communication for the learner. In last year's course 65% of the students used the phone, 26% used Skype. The rest of the students did not communicate using those means.

2.1 The outcome

At the end of last year's term a survey was given online to the students and 85% answered the questionnaire. The overall feeling is that they were rather satisfied with the new learning system even though they would have preferred to start earlier in the year. This is why this year the course will start as early as mid October and run until end of May. A few students claimed for more conversations with a teacher, it was interesting to see that those students were the ones pertaining to A2 or B2 level groups. This learning system also contributed to create a sense of camaraderie between the learners as we must not forget all the students are distant learners. In that respect, the dedicated forums which were set as being non formal contributed to some extent in creating a form of being part of a community. Finally, we observed an increased participation of students taking their end-of-term examination as due to compensation between subjects many students did not use to take them especially the weaker ones.

3. Teacher training

Are teachers ready?

It is important to bear in mind this question. Staff involved has to be trained for such a course. This can be seen as an obvious statement but when it comes to the reality of the field, this question becomes all the more relevant. Our department addresses thousands of students within several fields of activity and however stable staff is, there is inevitably staff turnover as in many institutions across the world. Colleagues with different statuses despite their commitment also have different agendas to cope with and it is not easy for some of them to foster the same energy and involvement. This raises the issue of staff training particularly in the context of languages. Our department has set a training policy where

several training sessions are provided throughout the year. There are formal sessions as well as informal ones. The formal sessions are set at the beginning of each term and time slots are blocked for that purpose. However, this is not fully satisfactory as many timetables change during the course of the year. Hence, finding time slots is a difficult task. One way to overcome this problem is to set very flexible informal sessions which are generally hands-on. We have set up a shared online bulletin board on which colleagues post their needs and problems and the persons who can help get in touch and agree on a time and date. The advantage is rapidity and it also contributes to strengthen staff cohesion. In the department we are four members of staff who can help out and accompany new colleagues or staff who need a refreshers course.

4. Conclusion

Despite uneasiness and sometimes fears of ICT, colleagues responded and respond favourably to the training sessions. This slow but yet inevitable process is an essential foothold to creating the conditions that - even more than before - we are engaged in a never-ending continuing process where the learner is at the centre of the learning/teaching system. However, theory is not practice; many obstacles had and still have to be overcome. There are some questions which still need to be answered. This learning/teaching strategy we believe in needs to be set within a clear and strong political framework, where decision-makers have to be convinced of the benefits of such a scheme. Cultural and financial barriers are to be broken down. Our language department now provides language courses involving blended learning and distance learning which are beneficial to our students whether they are face-to-face or distant.

References

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