Blended Learning in Language and Interpreter Training

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Abstract

The article discusses motivation in e-learning. It briefly reviews relevant aspects of motivation and individualisation theories. The main aspects we focus on are motivation, individualisation and the dynamic learner and teacher roles. The possibilities of applying blended learning in university level language teaching and interpreter training will be analysed. We approach the topic through the prism of examining the possibilities for supporting and encouraging student-centred learning and increasing student responsibility in their learning process.

1. Introduction

In our article we analyse the possibilities of applying blended learning (i.e. combined on-line + "in-class" learning) in university teaching for teaching language courses and in interpreter training. The topic will be approached through the prism of student motivation and capacity to grow into independent and self-sufficient learners.

2. Student Motivation and Dynamic Learner/Teacher Roles

2.1 Motivation

Web-based learning necessarily implies a great amount of student responsibility. This in its turn requires motivation, which is essential for a learning process to take place.

As Rob Dean [1] points out, for motivation to occur, for the students there needs to be: an interest in the topic, the will to understand and do more and the feeling that one can understand and can do more.

In theories of motivation, motivation is often divided into extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation goes hand in hand with student centred learning. Theobald [2] holds:

"Helping students find value in learning through the implementation of various instructional strategies and multiple alternative and authentic forms of assessments, while maintaining high standards of student performance in an environment which encourages students to do their best work by effective, nurturing teachers, will help increase the motivational levels of all students".

Dörnyei and Otto [3] give us a definition of motivation in L2 (second/foreign language) learning:

"In a general sense, motivation can be defined as the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritised, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out".

Judy Copage [4] stresses the importance of motivation through learner autonomy. Some of the main criteria, according to her, are the conditions in which our students can choose, be independent and sense and develop responsibility. Hasanbegovic [5] reviews a study on the impact of intrinsic motivation on e-learning in authentic computer tasks by Martens et al. 2004. The study allows her to conclude:

"In line with the motivation theory of Ryan and Deci it is predicted and evidenced that intrinsically motivated students do more in a fixed time period as a result of their higher effort and persistence and will do different things in computer environments that allow for this liberty of choice".

A well-balanced e-learning environment enables students to feel intrinsic motivation and to stay motivated throughout the learning process. It also enables one to view and analyse the progress and set new realistic goals.

2.2 Increasing Learner Responsibility

In addition to finding joy and pride in learning through intrinsic motivation, the learning process is more efficient when adequately conceptualised and reflected upon. A modern student, especially at the university level, must be able to envision and pursue their goals. An important assumption is that students can take responsibility for their study process. Teachers can be of considerable support here. Wilson [6] points out that student development through the university years can be seen as follows: "One view is that student growth occurs through an invariant sequence of stages or levels in which progress from stage to stage implies a restructuring and reorganisation of what went before. 'Higher' stages are qualitatively different from 'lower' stages in terms of the way the individual thinks, feels or acts. Another influential view is that student development is to be seen in terms of mastery of a series of developmental 'tasks' which involve the individual's maturation in the different aspects of intellect, emotions and social relationships".

Katrin Sachs [7] stresses the importance of "unconscious learners" becoming "conscious learners". She concludes:

"/.../ developing students' self-directing learning skills is not the easiest task, and the teacher's personal experience may not always be enough. However, going through the procedure with students step-by-step, starting with asking questions about the learner's goals and needs, proceeding with choosing suitable tools and methods and ending with looking at best ways of evaluating the process and reflecting on its progress will lead to a more conscious awareness of the learning process. Furthermore, having a central role in the decision-making process increases the learners' sense of responsibility and their willingness to take control over their learning process".

2.3 Modern discourse in professional roles: Changing Teachers' Roles

Modern education theories emphasise the importance of neglecting the former rigid models of seeing the students' minds as "an empty space" to be filled with information. Rather, students' interest for learning, and their creativity should be developed with the help of encouraging and creative teachers. Today, the role of the teacher is that of an advisor, an expert in the field whose task is to support the students' development [8]. This is much more creative and much more challenging than the more traditional "design and control the study process" concepts. Dörnyei [9] points out:

"/.../ teachers are powerful motivational socialisers. Being the officially designated leaders within the classroom, they embody group conscience, symbolise the group's unity and identity, and serve as a model or a reference/ standard. They also function as an 'emotional amplifier' of the group whose appeals and examples are critical for mobilising the group /.../. Simply speaking, to lead means to direct and energise, that is, to motivate".

Kiggins and Cambourne [10] emphasise the importance of a "triadic partnership" from the very beginning of training of young teachers: "/.../ trust becomes a required element in the knowledge building process, and if friendship and trust are not present among the student cohort, this process is unlikely to occur". Supporting student autonomy shows that there is trust for the teacher, and an increased responsibility for the learning process. Students are innovative and creative. Making them explicitly share responsibility for the process and outcome motivates them to come forward with fascinating and useful ideas. It also helps them envision the sense of responsibility for the community, which also should be present in the teacher´s role. Indeed, as Day and Sachs [11] point out: "/.../the teacher has a wider responsibility than the single classroom and includes contributing to the school, the system, other students, the wider community and collective responsibilities of teachers themselves as a group and the broader profession /.../".

3. The Possibilities for e-learning: Individualisation, Activating the Students, and Learning Concepts in Situated Meanings

As Normak [12] points out, a safe environment and certain playfulness are essential for developing thinking and becoming successful learners and members of society. E-learning has plentiful possibilities for catering for such needs also in the later stages of learning. Also, the principle of learning concepts in situated meanings is an important aspect to consider. Gee [13] points out that students need to acquire and try out the contents of concepts in situations that teach and test their real meaning. Only then does true learning take place. Without that, students may be able to complete seemingly perfect "pen and paper" tests. However, at closer testing, they prove not to be able to solve real problems [14].

The enthusing capacities of web-based learning solutions are similar to what has, for example, been pointed out as the educational reserve of video games. Out of the capacities that Gee [13] relates to positive learning techniques in video-games, we associate with professionally designed e-learning t: interactivity, adaptability, a gradual build-up of the level of difficulty, and following the principle of the "cycle of expertise". E-learning proves good results. For example, a SRI International for the Department of Education in Estonia [15] demonstrates that the learning results that have been reached by using ICT solutions are more profound than the learning results achieved through using traditional learning methods: "On average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction. Over the 12-year span, the report found 99 studies in which there were quantitative comparisons of online and classroom performance for the same courses. The analysis for the Department of Education found that, on average, students doing some or all of the course online would rank in the 59th percentile in tested performance, compared with the average classroom student scoring in the 50th percentile".

4. Using Blended Learning in Language Teaching and Interpreter Training

In our experience, e-learning has proved to be a fruitful environment for teaching general language courses, as well as for teaching/ learning terminology and ESP (English for Specific Purposes). In addition to learning and acquiring new vocabulary in a new language, the courses aim at helping students to form their personal opinion and being able to express it on issues topical in one's field of specialisation, as well as topics of general interest (e.g. through links to topical articles and hot debates both in their home-country and abroad, web-links, multimedia resources). An equally strong potential lies in making the theories, materials, techniques, vocabulary lists, multimedia support and materials, and even some practical exercises available on-line for interpreter training.

Exercises designed as an extension to activities carried out in the classroom support the acquisition of vocabulary, forming one's personal opinion, and being able to express it on topical issues. It enables students to understand their area of specialisation and many other important issues in a wider context. Allowing students to be co-creators of the learning materials is, as we know, an important factor in student-centred teaching.

Students have an overview of topical issues, their context and background, easy access for quickly finding inspiration, developing the skills for finding the right information, analyse, present and discuss it, developing the skills for using the e-environment and new technologies, developing responsibility for the learning process, forming one's own opinion and learning to express it.

5. Conclusion

As demonstrated in the article above, with the development of e-learning and blended learning endless opportunities for development and change are created. The role of teachers, students, and learning itself are continuously changing to offer exiting possibilities for further development. Hopefully, a student-centred approach based on individualisation, increasing the student motivation, and responsibility, as well as accepting the new and dynamic learner/teacher roles can be of support on this way. Blended learning can successfully be one of the options supporting us to pursue these goals.

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