E-learning Tools in Non-formal Education Environments

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Abstract

The use of e-learning is common practice in school and university environments nowadays. Therefore people who still visit schools and universities are somehow used to multimedia technologies and the Internet as a means of improving and facilitating their learning. The same is not true for people that have already left school or finished university. Some of them feel even uncomfortable in e-learning scenarios. The situation outlined here can be applied to language courses in private schools and institutes where participants are adults and young adults. Although they recognize that online learning tools can facilitate and improve the pace of their learning process, they seem not to make use of these tools. This paper consists of a threefold focus. First, it examines possible difficulties to adopt and implement online tools outside school and university environments. Second, it will highlight the advantages of incorporating e-learning tools specifically in the teaching of Portuguese. The third focus lays on the introduction and use of e-learning tools in classes of Portuguese as a foreign language. During a month, synchronous and asynchronous online activities were offered to two groups of 7 students each as a substitution and complement of the regular presential classes. The main objective was to motivate the students to adopt those e-Learning tools and incorporate them on their learning. Further, students should feel more confident with the language and be able to manage their learning inside and outside the classroom. Implications of the results for teaching and learning in non-formal education will be offered.

1. Introduction

Although the idea of learning throughout life is not new, it has gained more importance in the international discourse on education policy in the last two decades. Many programs have been developed to support the lifelong learning. The main focus of these programs is to enable individuals to go in search of learning opportunities for personal or professional reasons throughout life (see [1]). Personal improvement, employability, competitiveness and more active citizenship are some expected results of a lifelong learning program (LLP).

Due to the importance of information and communication technologies in our society nowadays, digital competence plays an important role in LLPs. Individuals should be able to use computers to "retrieve, assess, store, produce, present and exchange information, and to communicate and participate in collaborative networks via the Internet" [2]. Although many people are able to use computers, the digital competence is unequal among individuals.

2. E-learning in non-formal educational environments

2.1 Digital divide, digital literacies

Prensky [3] makes a distinction between digital natives (people who were born and raised surrounded by and using computers, e-mails, Internet, cell phones and all the other digital age technologies) and digital immigrants (people who were not born in the digital world, but adopted and learnt how to use the new technologies later in life).

For Warschauer [4], the term digital divide is more complex than just separating people in different groups according to age and availability of computing devices or Internet access. What divides individuals is their ability to communicate, access and publish information using the digital age technologies. Thus, digital competence has different levels of literacy in a similar way as reading and writing.

Taking into account the perspectives of both authors on digital divide, it is certain that a part of the population is aside from digital competence. Definitely age, computing devices availability and Internet access are important factors, but being digital competent is to understand and to be able to evaluate what the possibilities and advantages of using ICT are.

2.2 Non-formal education

As a support for the development of digital competence, the educational environment – formal, non-formal or informal – plays a significant role.

The education and training that is not part of a regular system of schools, colleges and universities is defined as non-formal education [5] [6]. This type of education doesn't lead to certification, though different countries work on creating guidelines for validating non-formal learning (see [7]).

Just to name a few language schools, community courses and classes with private instructors would fall into this category.

2.3 Possible difficulties to adopt and implement e-learning tools

Non-formal educational environments face some problems such as:

– Budget: small non-formal education institutions usually work with a tight budget. They still must invest money to train the personnel and to arrange the technological equipment, but investments are expected to have positive results as fast as possible.

– Personnel: it is often limited and leads to a situation in which one person is responsible for different new tasks, like creating content, designing and tutoring, in addition to the usual ones.

– Learners: if they perceive the e-learning environment as just a change of medium, chances are that they won't take part, at least not spontaneously.

– Other variables: commercial language schools differ in size, interest and quality. Even when an e-learning project fits the budget, the school management may opt for not implementing it.

3. Advantages of using e-learning tools in the teaching of Portuguese as a foreign language

Considering the Brazilian variation of Portuguese, course materials are still limited. Usually the learners don't have the opportunity to listen to different accents. Listening materials focus mostly on Southeast Brazilian accent. The same applies to social and cultural aspects depicted in books, leading often to a one-sided view. Moreover, Brazilian Portuguese has two variants: one that is basically used in formal written language and another that is used in other situations. Their significant differences are not covered in course books, though learners should be aware of them right from the beginning.

These problems can be, at least, reduced with the help of e-learning tools. Social network, podcasts, wikis, videos, blogging, forums and chat-rooms focus on culture and languages aspects at the same time. They also bridge the gap between formal and informal language, offering authentic materials.

Besides the independency of learning time, pace and place, e-learning tools makes it easier to bring different variants of Portuguese together. They can be very unusual even for native speakers of Portuguese.

4. Case Study

4.1 Learners and classes

The e-learning tools were used with two groups of 7 students each (A1 and A2 levels [8]). The students have different mother tongues, but the majority speaks German. The age varies from end-20s to end-30s. Most of them have finished their B.A. or master studies and work regularly.

They have classes once a week for one and a half hours in a cultural centre that also offers activities other than language classes. A course book series is used with both groups. The centre where the classes take place is not equipped with a computer that students and/or teacher could use before, during or after the class. Wi-Fi Internet access is not available either.

4.2 Integration

The first step was to choose a LMS. It had to be web-based, have a simple easy-to-use interface for both teacher and students, allow easy and flexible content creation, and be free. From all the systems available in the market, Haiku LMS seemed to be the one that best fit our needs. And above all, it offered fairly complete statistics about the use of the system and the users. Additionally to the LMS, there were chat meetings that took place once or twice a week via Skype.

For the reasons mentioned before, the students needed to have access to Internet at home, at work or a

mobile connection, in order to use Haiku and Skype. They got an invitation to enrol one of the two groups: either Portuguese 1 (A1 level) or Portuguese 2 (A2 level).

In the Portuguese 1 group just two students registered, whereas in the Portuguese 2 group, 5 out of 7 enrolled in the class.

4.3 Activities

Asynchronous und synchronous activities were elaborated. The asynchronous type involved from what we may call traditional exercises but available online, as matching and fill-in-the blanks, to activities that catered for peer-to-peer interaction, like discussion boards and wikis.

Voice, text and video chats counted for the synchronous type. The text function was used to give examples, to clarify the spelling of certain words, to write new words and expressions that come up during the chat session, even by voice or video chat. The objective was to talk about any topic the students wanted to. Initially the chats were scheduled to last 90 minutes but they went up to 2 hours.

5. Feedback and next steps

In spite of the low engagement rate from one of the groups, the students that took part in the activities found Haiku very useful especially to keep up with classes they might have missed. Another positive aspect pointed out by the students was the chance to practise once again what they have learnt during the class at their own pace. Discussion boards, wikis and comment function were practically ignored.

Concerning the synchronous activities, just 3 out of 14 students turned up for the online meetings. Students reported feeling more confident to speak. It was a surprise for them to see how much they could learn during a chat. Further feedbacks account for retrieving faster the vocabulary and the structures they have already seen.

The reason most students gave not to take part in any of the activities was that they spend many hours every day in front of computers and when they go home they want to be offline. Some other students said they have never used Skype and that was the reason why they had no idea how it worked. To solve this problem, a part of the presential class was used to explain how to create an account and add people to contact lists, but with no success as many students have not created an account anyway.

All in all, students that were engaged in those online activities slightly improved their accuracy and were more confident to communicate in Portuguese in comparison to the other ones.

The project to adopt and incorporate e-learning tools is going to be conducted again, being mindful that digital literacies have to be considered and a plan to tackle the different literacies should be developed. Learner need help to use technology effectively with teachers want more engagement. Thrusting things on learners can cause an uncomfortable situation, as the digital divide is more obvious for the participants.

Finally, the adoption of e-learning tools is difficult and time consuming when the teacher is alone, without the support of an institution whatsoever. It's also a financial question. The adoption is not impossible though. Free LMS, authoring tools and webinar tools can make it feasible for small groups in spite of the limitations of free accounts.

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