OL4LL: Online Languages for Lifelong Learning

**Francesca Magnoni, Laura Incalcaterra McLoughlin, Dorothy Ní Uigín,
Éamon Ó Cofaigh, Máire Áine Ní Mhainnín**
National University of Ireland, (Ireland)
francesca.magnoni@nuigalway.ie

Abstract

This paper examines e-learning in Applied Linguistics, in the specific areas of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. It will report on findings from a research project carried out at the National University of Ireland Galway in 2014, funded by the Irish Research Council and investigating the demographic profile and learning style of adult online language learners at this university. We will first review available literature specifically dealing with e-learning in language learning and position our research within the wider methodological framework. We will then outline our project and report on quantitative and qualitative data collected from adult online learners of Irish and Italian through questionnaires employing both Likert scale items and open-ended questions, and through a Vark (Fleming 2001) learning style questionnaire. We will map the profiles of current participants in our e-courses in relation to age, gender, educational and professional background, geographical collocation, motivation, expectations, learning style, level of technological proficiency, attitude towards and use of social networking tools. We will further comment on profile, motivational factors and learning styles of online language course users at NUI Galway and consider the implications for course design and curriculum development, choice of technology and pedagogical resources. Finally, we will discuss the implications of our findings for the design of language courses to be delivered through e-learning in order to stimulate further interest in language learning among adult and non-traditional students and help them to overcome the difficulties connected with the challenge of a new language.

1. Introduction

Data presented in this paper were collected as part of the research project *Online Languages for Lifelong Learning*, funded by the Irish Research Council under the New Foundations scheme, and relate to two online language courses offered at the National University of Ireland, Galway: *The Diploma in Italian Online* (a two-year programme) and the *BA sa Ghaeilge Fheidhmeach* (Applied Irish, a four-year degree programme); the students completed the language modules of the BA using Blackboard Collaborate in year three. Both programmes are delivered in blended learning. The Diploma in Italian Online includes six on-campus sessions, six synchronous online classes and six conversation classes via Skype. In the case if the BA, the online work was supplemented with monthly workshops of two hours each (six workshops in total). Questionnaires distributed to students helped define an initial profile of online language learners with a view to matching that profile with future syllabus design, choice of technological tools and pedagogical resources.

2. Available literature and methodological framework

Our project examines e-learning in Applied Linguistics, in the specific areas of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. It investigates profile, motivational factors and learning styles of online language course users at NUI Galway and considers the implications for course design and curriculum development, choice of technology and pedagogical resources. We designed and distributed questionnaires to determine the student profiles and to classify them according to age, gender, educational and professional background, geographical collocation, motivation, expectations, learning style, level of technological proficiency, attitude towards and use of social networking tools. Quantitative data was collected through Likert scale items, while qualitative data was gathered using open-ended questions.

In addition, the project includes an examination of existing bibliographical material on the e-learning of languages, an area that still appears to be under-explored. The bibliographical research was organized under four main headings: a. e-learning and foreign language acquisition (26 articles); b. e-learning and teaching (10 articles); c. e-learning and foreign language course structural design (2 books and 1 article) d. e-learning and teacher training (4 articles). This will be made available on the project website, currently under construction.

3. Diploma in Italian online & BA sa Ghaeilge Fheidhmeach: students profile

Information presented here is based on a preliminary qualitative and quantitative analysis that will form the basis for a future more comprehensive collection of data about learning skills, abilities and styles to be considered for the development and implementation of innovative structural design and creation of *ad hoc* pedagogical material.

For the *Online Diploma in Italian* 18 students out of 27 filled in the questionnaires, 10 female and 8 male. All students resided in Ireland, mainly on the east coast (51%), followed by western counties (46%) and Southern ones (3%). The average age of the majority of the students is between 36 and 45 (33%), followed by 26-35 (28%), 56-65 (22%) and 46-55 (17%). 72% of the students resided more than 150km from the university, only one student resided less than 30km away. The majority (13 out of 18) are in full-time employment, 3 are retired, 1 works part-time. Their highest academic qualifications are: Diploma/Ordinary Degree (22%), Leaving Certificate (17%), Fetac Award [1] (17%), Masters Degree (9%), Honours Degree (2%). All students indicated English as their native language, except for 1 Polish native speaker. The main technological difficulties encountered related to broadband connection (22%) but also to the use of specific software/platforms (Praat [2] 7%, ClipFlair [3] 8%), their own operating systems and Blackboard compatibility with their internet bowser (11%), ClipFlair (8%). 14% experienced technical difficulties but did not elaborate. Reactions to the video confering tool Blackboard Collaborate, used for online delivery of classes are: on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very positive), 50% between 3 and 5 (with 39% at level 4), 17% at level 5, 11% at level 2.

Students were also asked about their perceived IT skills prior to and following attendance of the course – using the same 1-5 scale. It emerged that no student rated their IT skills at level 1 either before or after the course and the majority (44%) rated themselves at level 3. After the online course the majority (39%) rated their IT skills at level 4, showing a significant improvement. In particular, 2 students moved from level 2 to level 3, 2 from 2 to 5. In general, 9 students rated their IT skills as improved and 9 students as unchanged.

When asked to compare the online language-learning experience with traditional classroom-based language learning, they expressed the following evaluation, referring to a scale from 1(very poor) to 5 (most pleased): the majority of students (39%) rating e-learning at level 4; The lowest rating was 2, for only 6% of students.

Comments provided by 12 students about their general experience with the *Online Diploma in Italian* show that: 5 were annoyed with their difficulties with technical tools and IT skills, and among them 2 referred in particular to Praat and Clipflair. 2 expressed their appreciation for the blended format of the course, referring to the on-campus sessions as very useful as an opportunity to meet their classmates, 3 wished the course could be continued further as they found the 'anywhere/anytime' condition a great help for learning. One of the students stressed the importance of the conversation classes, this however is not a critique as the *Diploma in Italian Online* includes group conversation sessions on Skype. One student expressed his/her increase the confidence in both IT skills and Italian throughout the course. Another student pointed out how the interaction with tutors and peers was a fundamental part of his/her learning process during the course.

For the *BA sa Ghaeilge Fheidhmeach* **–** 24 questionnaires were collected, from a total of 30 students; 7 from female and 18 from male students. Again, all students resided in Ireland and mainly in the west: 56%, 40% in the east and 4% is in the Midlands. The average age of the majority of the students is between 56 and 65 (42%), then 46-55 (28%), 36-45 (20%), 26-35 (12%). 28% of the students live between 51 and 100km from NUI Galway, 24% are more that 150km away, 24% between 101 and 150km; 16% of the students live less than 30km away and the final 8% live between 31 and 50km from Galway. The employment situation is as follows: 68% have a full time job, 16% are retired, 12% have a part-time job while 4% did not specify. Their highest qualification in Education is a Diploma or Ordinary Degree (40%), Honours Degree (28%), Masters Degree and Fetac Award (12%), Leaving Certificate (4%) and PhD (4%). About the technical difficulties encountered by the students, the majority (26%) had problems with the Java version, 24% had problems with their own broadband connection, 15% with Blackboard compatibility, 6% did not elaborate. 29% experienced difficulties with their own operating system.

Personal experience with Blackboard Collaborate video conferencing tool was overwhelmingly positive with 84% rating between 4 and 5. 48% rated their online experience at level 4 and only 4% at level 2.

Data regarding perception of IT skills shows that at the beginning of the online course the majority of students (44%) rated themselves at level 3 while at the end of the course 52% rated their IT skills at level 4. Before the online course 4% saw themselves at level 1, after the course the lowest perceived level as 3 (12%).

Comparing online language learning with traditional classroom-based experience, 88% rated online learning between 3 and 5: 40% rated online learning at level 4, 12% valued the online learning at level 2.

From the comments left by 17 students we can extrapolate that the availability of material online was greatly appreciated by most .One student pointed out how the "feeling of isolation" can be an obstacle to real learning as it is harder to be aware if one has difficulties with specific topics but s/he also highlighted the great advantage highlighted for having "anywhere/anytime" access to the material – which is something missing in a classroom-based course, as he/she noticed. One student highlighted the fact that the online course allowed one to qualify while working and the appreciation for 'all the system' has been emphasised. Three students out 17 highlighted the importance of the blended structure of the course, stating their appreciation for the face-to-face interaction both with tutors and classmates.

4. Implications, comments and further developments (Conclusion)

The profile of the students of the two online languages courses offered by NUI Galway shows that the majority are aged between 36 and 65 and in full time employment. The geographical distribution of students is different for the two courses, with a majority of students of the *Diploma in Italian* residing in the east, as opposed to the west for *BA sa Ghaeilge Fheidhmeach*. In both cases, students have a good level of prior qualifications, the Diploma or Ordinary Degree being the most common. Students in both courses perceived an improvement in their IT skills and some also reported increased confidence in both linguistic and technological proficiency. This shows that the multimodal and multisensorial approach to language learning/teaching evident in online modules can benefit students on several levels and contribute to the development of useful transferable skills.

From a course-design point of view, it is important to note that not all students who enrol in online modules are IT proficient, indeed some perceive themselves as being rather poor. This implies that while developing an online language course, the technological proficiency of students cannot be taken for granted and this is an added challenge for course designers. The availability of material "anytime/anywhere" is seen as one of the most advantageous aspects of e-learning, something that again has implications for course design in relation to repository and archival facilities as well as search and retrieval functions. Last but not least, respondents from both courses stressed the importance of the blended-learning format for the successful completion of the course. Students from the *Diploma in Italian* Online emphasised how vital the online conversation classes were for them, representing a moment of interaction not only with their tutors but also with their peers. As a student pointed out: the "group feeling is necessary". Indeed, this "group feeling", or the sense of belonging to a Community of Practice is the element that differentiates e-learning methodologies from other online non-collaborative solutions and allows the e-learning practitioners to exploit successfully all the online solutions offered by advances in web technology.

References

[1] Fetac is the Further Education and Training Awards Council in Ireland. For more information please see http://www.fetac.ie/
[2] Praat is a speech-analysis software freely downloadable from http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/
[3] ClipFlair is a free platform facilitating language learning through revoicing and captioning of videoclips. www.clipgflair.net