



The Challenge of Raising Awareness of Interference Using ICT

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Abstract

Considering that interference is a major concern for second language teachers and learners and that new teaching and learning strategies are in need, this study aims at assessing the validity of extra activities carried out online (ICT-based activities) to students evidencing a higher awareness of interference. This concept encompasses various phenomena, which have been object of ongoing studies, both in terms of empirical research as well as in terms of pedagogical processes. Language transfer manifests itself at phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic levels. However, culture and cultural differences are at the core of these occurrences. Thus, false friends may be adequately understood as significant examples of semantic interference. Conducted at two higher education institutions in Portugal, this project was developed along distinct phases. Firstly, lecturers discussed false friends with students from three different classes (Classes 1 and 2 at Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa and Class 3 at Universidade Europeia), providing examples and eliciting their previous knowledge on the subject. Secondly, all the classes had to do a worksheet on the false friends discussed in class, as well as other common false friends. Thirdly, classes 1 and 2 alone solved specifically created online exercises on the same group of false friends included in the referred paper worksheet. These online exercises had to be solved within two weeks. Finally, after this period of time, all three classes were tested by means of a small quiz. Expected results are that students who completed the extra exercises using ICT resources perform better than those who did not.

1. Introduction

Being educators, the authors have felt the need to address one aspect of linguistic ambiguity: interference of the mother-tongue in second-language acquisition of vocabulary. Considering the relative closeness of the Portuguese and English languages, this is a rather common issue in the English classroom in Portugal.

The two authors lecture English as a Second Language (ESL) in two higher education institutions (Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa – UAL – and Universidade Europeia) and have experienced a similar phenomenon, in face of which they have implemented a set of different strategies. This study derives from the shared project of devising and experimenting new strategies towards minimizing learning difficulties at vocabulary level, in particular, false friends. The authors also aimed to verify and assess the impact the online exercises (autonomous learning) have on students' awareness of language ambiguity (false friends).

2. Literature review

2.1 ICT and language teaching

Information and Communication Technology encompasses hardware (computers, laptops, mobile phones, audio and digital equipment, and so on) software applications and information systems (the Internet, for instance) all of which are now part of our personal and professional life and, therefore, also part of education. The integration of technology in the process of teaching and learning is considered as having multiple effects in terms of motivation and learning results.

In opposition to traditional methods, ICT provides resources for learning in and outside the classroom. Studies have shown that for ICT to be part of everyday teaching, teachers must believe in its effectiveness, that its introduction will not cause disruption in class and that they have control over technology [1]

Considering that learning is a process, a construction, ICT provides the opportunity for students to decide on their learning path in a student-centred learning approach. Moreover, the use of technology allows for content to be tailored to the needs and capabilities of each student as well as to time limitations,

2.2 Interference

When learning a second language, learners use their mother tongues (L1) schemata as a reference for producing in the foreign language (L2). According to scholars such as [2], the number of errors is



directly related to the distance between L1 and L2. In our case, the two languages are not very distant and Portuguese learners are constantly exposed to English language (L2). Considering that the fluency in L1 can help or hinder the learning of L2 and that learning a second language can pose a greater challenge to adult learner, we designed this study giving learners the possibility of doing an extra set of exercises so as to assess whether that variable would have an impact in their awareness of false friends, made visible in a final quiz.

False friends are commonly defined as “pairs of words that appear similar, but have different meaning in some or all contexts” [3]. For the purpose of this study, we chose false friends as examples of lexical interference because, on the one hand, our students’ English skills were elementary (A2....) and therefore instances of interference are mostly expected at lexical level and, on the other, their occurrence has helped to produce a more standardized approach to the subject, notwithstanding the inclusion of two higher education institutions.

3. The study

This study results from a generally acknowledged need to closely analyze the impact of L1 in the learning of L2. As lecturers of English at two private higher education institutions in Portugal, the authors have frequently encountered instances of language interference in the students’ written and oral production of English.

3.1 Description and methodology

This study resulted from an exercise presented to students both in class and online. In previous studies by the authors, the objective was to collect data on the use of false friends in written assignments. [4] The authors’ main goal has been to reach effective teaching and learning strategies to not only improve students’ understanding and use of false friends but also widen teachers’ resources in approaching this issue.

For this study, a session was selected for explaining and applying knowledge on false friends. Using active and explaining methodologies, namely, resorting to students’ previous knowledge and a PowerPoint presentation specifically designed for the class, the concept of false friends was revised and numerous examples were provided and discussed. Finally, a worksheet was given with exercises to be completed and corrected in class.

The next step was to allow students whose syllabus included compulsory online exercises to complete a set on false friends (multiple choice – with option 1 and 2 – a crossword puzzle and a multiple choice exercise with prompts). Two weeks after the class on false friends, all students were asked to complete an in-class quiz.

A variable differentiates two target groups: only some classes were required to complete the above mentioned online exercises. Students attending one higher education institution (HEI) – Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa - had to do these exercises as part of their assessment (classes 1 and 2), the other HEI – Universidade Europeia - did not include the same online exercises as assessment criteria. The quiz included a multiple choice exercise with the false friends discussed in class and, in the case of classes 1 and 2, in the online exercises, as well as a gap-filling exercise with prompts in Portuguese.

3.2 Discussion of results

Participants include 71 students (Classes 1 and 2) from Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa and 34 students from Universidade Europeia, i.e. a total of 115 students.

Of the 71 students from UAL who did the quiz, 34 had also done the online interactive exercises (47,9%). The majority of students who did both activities had a score of 60% or above. In fact, 28 out of the referred 34 scored over 85% (five obtained 100%; nine obtained 97%; six 93%; four 90%; four 87%; and one 83%). The lowest mark in the test was 40%, however, and among those who did not do the online exercises, seven scored below 50% (9,9% of the total number of students). Only eight out of the thirty-seven students who did not complete the online exercises scored above 90%.

In Table 1, we present the results obtained in the quiz by the 34 students that also completed the online exercises. In Table 2, you can find the scores by those students who only did the quiz.



Table 1 (in %)

100	97	93	90	87	83	80	77	73	70	67	63	60	57	53	50	47	43	40
5	9	6	4	4	1		1	1		1	1	1						

Table 2 (in %)

100	97	93	90	87	83	80	77	73	70	67	63	60	57	53	50	47	43	40
3	3	2	5	3	2	3	2	2	2	1	1					3	1	3

As you can see, most scores in Table 1 are above 80% and the lower marks are above 60%, whereas scores in Table 2 are more scattered, i.e., there are those who obtained high marks (80% or above), those with average marks (60-79%) and those with low marks (59% or below).

The results achieved by students from Universidade Europeia are shown in Table 3. As previously stated, these students were not given the online exercises as a means to drill on the linguistic topic of false friends, even though they, too, were given the chance to attend a class on this matter. The material and teaching methodology in this class was the exact same as the ones used in Classes 1 and 2 (Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa).

Table 3 (in %)

100	97	93	90	87	83	80	77	73	70	67	63	60	57	53	50	47	43	40
4	2		3	4	4	3	2	3		2	2			2		2		1

In 34 students, only 5 scored below 60% and the majority scored above 80%. Results are generally speaking very much scattered as well, but one notices that the fact that these students did not do the online exercises was not detrimental to their success when answering the in-class quiz. We might then consider whether or not all of these students attended the class on false friends, where all had the opportunity to do some exercises and to correct them.

Looking at attendance records, two conclusions may be drawn:

1. In the case of students from Universidade Autónoma, all those who attended the class and did the in-class exercises and then also completed the online exercises scored above 80% in the quiz, thus evidencing the relevance of both autonomous work and guided learning in the language acquisition process;
2. As far as students from Universidade Europeia, there is not a direct correspondence between having attended the class on false friends and successfully answering the quiz. In fact, two of the students who scored the lowest (40 and 47%) were indeed present in class, when the lecture on false friends and subsequent drilling was conducted. Moreover, of the four students who obtained 100% only one attended the referred class. Also, this group was not required to do any online exercises, having thus been solely exposed to guided learning.

4. Conclusion

The results achieved by the students in one of the universities evidences the relevance of autonomous learning - a determining factor in the difference revealed by quiz scores. We can, therefore, conclude that resorting to students' acquired knowledge and providing them with the possibility to autonomously learn does boost the learning process.

In terms of Class 3 (students from Universidade Europeia), we may also conclude that the students' background knowledge of English is a determining variable. This makes it evident that, though guided learning plays a significant role, other elements must be considered as tools and/or resources to successfully master a lexical area such as false friends. These elements are the students' previous knowledge of English and autonomous learning possibilities, which subsequently foster students' confidence in their linguistic skills.

References

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