LinguApp: Bridging the Language Gap

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Abstract

Learning and teaching a second language is nowadays a priority as well as one of the most relevant educational objectives for most international institutions. The predominance of English in this paradigm is undisputed, as it is the lingua franca for international business, cultural and academic exchange, and for the dissemination of science. The effective and efficient learning of a second language constitutes a foundation of inestimable value to help peoples to live together in peace: "Throughout the last decade, European multilingualism policy has been guided by the objective set by the Barcelona Council of March 2002, which called for the improvement of mastery of basic skills, in particular, by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age", which aligns with the objectives of Horizon 2020. Furthermore, the Preface to the Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe (2012) "underlines the necessity to enable citizens to communicate in two languages in addition to their mother tongue, as well as the need to promote language teaching and provide migrants with opportunities to learn the language of the host country". Therefore, to assure universal access to second language learning is a priority for most international institutions, but such access is biased by economic and social differences (in terms of possibilities and resources). This phenomenon, named the language gap "has spawned multiple scholarly trajectories that aim to point out linguistic inferiorities in characteristics like communicative quality, language processing, and overall health" (Johnson & Zentella, 2017, p. 1). The main objective of our study is to introduce the foundations of a competitive research project, LinguApp (PRY 208/17), funded by Fundación Andaluza Centro de Estudios Andaluces (PRY208/17) from Junta de Andalucía (Spain), whose main goal is to contribute to avoid the language gap. LinguApp, designed and thought as a universal and free accessed web app (called MentorLang), will contribute to offer the autonomous learner the necessary orientation and counselling for the successful learning of English or Spanish as a second language, contributing thus to minimize the impact of the language gap.

Keywords: *Language gap, second language learning, orientation, counselling, web app;*

1. Introduction

Language learning is a priority set by most educational international policies. In this paradigm, the predominance of English is recognized in the literature as the language of exchange for science, culture, information and business. Nevertheless, access to second language learning is not uniform, as socio-economic differences can impact on both academic achievement and language acquisition. Jonhson & Zentella (2017, p. 1) [1] state: "Gap discourses have facilitated the way language use within economically disadvantaged communities is simultaneously blamed for academic disparities and targeted for remediation." Additionally, language has been reported as a key element to improve the individual's socio-economic status (SES). Schluessel (2007) [2], Tsung (2009) [3], and Zelasko & Antúnez (2000) [4] underlined the possibilities that good commandment of second languages opens for bilingual university graduates, who will improve their options to get a position in the international arena. Innovation and Communication Technologies (ICT) in 21st century society have made language learning ubiquitous and autonomous for many sectors of the population, regardless their SES. But autonomous language learning faces a number of difficulties, among which we can identify: a. Risk of abandonment (Lin, Warschauer & Blake, 2016 [5]; Nunan, 2013 [6]); and b. Lack of motivation caused by feelings of loneliness and isolation (Duranton & Mason, 2012) [7].
Therefore, the need of expert aid in autonomous language learning processes has become a must to which the research project described herein, *LinguApp*, wishes to contribute.

2. Theoretical backdrop

Innovation in second language learning in 21st century is deeply connected to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL). CALL was coined by Davies & Steel in 1981 [8], and it has evolved significantly since then. CALL is quite a transparent term and it has been defined profusely in the literature. Additionally, some other derived acronyms

have appeared which are connected to CALL (e.g. Computer-Aided Instruction (CAI), Computer-Assisted Learning (CAL), Computer-Assisted Language Instruction (CALI), Computer-Assisted Language Teaching (CALT), and Computer-Based Training (CBT), among others). Parmaxi & Zaphiris [9] (2016, p. 4) state: "Research conducted in the area of Web 2.0 technologies in CALL is grounded either in generic learning theories or in SLA theories". On the other hand, TELL refers to the use of any technology (not only computers) to language learning. The advantages of the use of ICT (both TELL and CALL) to acquire and improve second languages are numerous, among which we can consider the following ones: ubiquity, flexibility, variety (of second languages, registers and codes), and updated contents, among others.

Autonomy is one of the most salient features of CALL and TELL, as the learner has the freedom to choose resources, to plan and schedule the time devoted to learning, and to set the pace and goals of language learning. Additionally, regarding CALL research highlights that "it can increase motivation to learn and consequently increases learning effectiveness" (Sanprasert, 2010, p. 109) [10]. Nevertheless, autonomy in turn can result in a threat to this paradigm: both low motivation and responsibility can impact negatively on this type of learning as they can lead to abandonment.

Autonomous learning can benefit from professional counselling and guidance of language teachers, who can aid the process by setting appropriate paths and offering some kind of reward to the learner along specific stages. Deci & Ryan (1991) [11] linked learner's autonomy to "relatedness needs", referring to the needs for contact, support, counselling and even community.

3. LinguApp: A research project to bridge the language gap

LinguApp: Ensuring Universal and Inclusive Access to Second Language Learning (*LinguApp* hereinafter) is a research project (Reference No. PRY208/17) granted by *Fundación Andaluza Centro de Estudios Andaluces* (Consejería de la Presidencia – Junta de Andalucía) in its 2017 competitive call.

The project stems from the theoretical bases herein analysed: CALL and TELL, where individual learning of second languages is only understood nowadays if it is carried out online. Therefore, the combination of autonomy (specifically determined by responsibility and motivation), digital competences, and appropriate guidance from experts should lead to a higher level of success in the area by minimising the negative impact of the drawbacks identified by the literature.

The main objective of *LinguApp* is to design and implement a free web app which can offer the user the possibility to access a selected variety of language learning websites.

The selection of specific language learning webs has been done according to the following research criteria: a. Quality of both contents and technical features. b. Stability, so that consistency and permanence in time are ensured. c. Gratuity, as only free-access websites are eligible within the project's goals.

Thus, *LinguApp* researchers are designing a web app (called *MentorLang*) whose main purpose is to guide the user through an accompanied learning process where specific parameters (e.g. learner's personal features, records, achievements and content choices) are taken into account to offer the best options according to:

1. User's learning objectives (set at the beginning of the process and introduced in the web app).
2. Initial language level.
3. Foreseen time for learning (measured in hours per week).
4. Desired deadline to achieve the objectives set.

Then, one of the secondary objectives of *LinguApp* (which stems from the main objective set above) is to offer professional guidance and counselling (from expert language teachers) to autonomous language learners, so that the risk of abandonment induced by lack of guidance and feelings of loneliness and isolation can be reduced to their minimum. Moreover, the careful selection of websites made by *LinguApp* researchers can contribute to reduce the risk of bad language use, as learners will mostly use those websites which offer appropriate feedback (especially in the lower levels of the CEFR).

4. Discussion

The evolvement of autonomous second language learning stems from innovation, where CALL and TELL plays a fundamental role. When TELL is adequately implemented, research suggests that it increases motivation, global collaboration, empowerment and student-centred learning, construction of knowledge, global understanding, intercultural awareness and digital citizenship (Tafazoli, Gómez & Huertas, 2018) [12]. Nevertheless, some of the drawbacks affecting the process (e.g. lack of

motivation and risk of abandonment) make guidance from the experts (language teachers) a need that must be addressed.

Autonomous learning is only understood nowadays when it comes under the umbrella of digital competence. *LinguApp* is a research project whose main goal is to help autonomous language learners to overcome the language gap by expert guiding and counselling from researchers. Therefore *MentorLang* will devote its efforts to offer the coaching that the literature has identified as a key element both to improve motivation and to foster autonomy among 21st century language learners.

Acknowledgment

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