New Media in and beyond the University Classroom: Opportunities through Change

TRINDER Ruth (1), CARRARO Katia (2)

Vienna University of Business and Economics, Austria (1)
University of Fribourg, Switzerland (2)

Abstract

Digitalisation and globalisation have transformed how we acquire foreign languages, not least by extending learning environments far beyond classroom walls. As today so much of L2 English learning and use is facilitated by technology and takes place outside formal learning spaces, we need to ask ourselves how this affects students' perspective on what institutional environments offer. In this paper, we first investigate stakeholders' (teachers' and students') views on the facilities provided on the campus of an Austrian Business University: lecture halls and a state-of-the-art self-access Language Learning Centre (LLC) both equipped with the latest technology. Drawing on interviews conducted with teachers, we discuss to what extent they regularly employ the available technological equipment (PC and projector, internet and smart boards) and explore the rationales governing uptake or rejection of the tools. Second, we investigate whether students' everyday access to authentic language resources influences their views of teacher-controlled technology in class or their motivation to visit the LLC. Based on surveys and the results of the annual LLC monitoring, we will juxtapose students' perceptions of the benefits of technology use in formal spaces with their informal, independent practices, thus presenting data from three interlinked learning environments as well as from the perspectives of both teachers and students.

Keywords: *Technologies for language learning and teaching; student and teacher perceptions; informal learning*

1. Background

1.1 Instructed, self-instructed and naturalistic learning on campus

A number of developments have influenced and changed the learning and teaching environments at Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU). Most important amongst the 'local' changes, and greatly enhancing the teaching context, was WU's move five years ago to a brand-new campus. This represented a quantum leap in terms of classrooms facilities: teachers now have easy access to internet and multimedia presentation technologies in all seminar rooms.

The main part of the LLC is set up for autonomous learning, boasting a self-access area with a well-stocked media library, 27 PCs for individual work, a lounge area with sofas, tablets and journals, as well as five so-called Tandem rooms. The self-access area caters to a variety of needs. It was conceived as a physical location providing material, social and virtual resources for formal and informal, self-instructed and naturalistic learning. According to Benson, the dimension of formality refers to "the degree to which learning is independent of organized courses leading to formal qualifications" [3]. The LLC, in collaboration with the Department for Foreign Language Business Communication, developed toolkits to guide students in their selection of materials for their WU language courses in the LLC. Moreover, a wide range of specially designed materials complementing formal English, French, Spanish, Italian and Russian courses were developed.

Students can thus engage in formal, albeit self-instructed out-of-classroom learning. At the other end of the dimension, they may opt for 'self-directed naturalistic learning activities' such as watching IPTV in the target language (TL). Benson [4] understands the latter type of learning as having a different pedagogy; though a naturalistic learning situation is set up deliberately by the learner, e.g. by choosing to watch a favourite series in the TL, the focus is on enjoyment rather than the language itself. This contrasts with the more structured, sequenced approach of dedicated language resources.

1.2 New media beyond the university

The second major development shaping students' learning experiences is the ready availability of mobiles, tablets and other networked computers, which make naturalistic (as well as self-instructed) learning activities location-independent. Though English is considered the natural language for much Web-based communication, social media, e-mail and blogs/vlogs offer affordances also for languages other than English. Technology has become an integral part of students' daily lives, affording plenty of opportunities for TL exposure, TL use, and, consequently, incidental and deliberate TL acquisition.

2. Research questions

We are firstly interested in establishing to what extent teachers and students exploit and appreciate the technological infrastructure at the three university-provided learning environments (classrooms and self-access LLC), which had, after all, required major investment in financial and training resources. Second, we aim to find out how learning spaces interact, particularly given the exponential rise in informal, naturalistic and self-instructed learning facilitated by technology use. Finally, we address the teacher's role in bridging in-class and out-of-class learning spaces.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Classrooms

This section is based on semi-structured interviews with a sample of 25 teachers from the English, Romance and Slavic Institutes, which represents nearly half of the faculty of the Department of Foreign Language Business Communication. We ensured that the sample was relatively balanced in terms of functions (full-time lecturers vs. research staff), teaching experience and age. The student perspective on teacher-controlled tech draws on three sources: teachers' perceptions of student attitudes, students' official course evaluations, and survey data collected for a previous study on informal learning [5].

All classrooms are equipped with a computer monitor, which displays the image being projected onto the screens (smartboard and whiteboard), and an interactive pen display, which teachers can use to make notes on documents. Training sessions on the functions of the projection technologies and the more advanced smartboard were offered to all lecturers.

All respondents feel - by now - quite at ease with the equipment. They appreciate the advantages of being able to present multimedia content directly from the internet or USB stick. To varying degrees, they all use Powerpoint or Word documents, with hyperlinks connecting to audio, video or text. However, very few of the respondents use the full array of smartboard functions with any regularity. In the age group 40+, the barriers we identified are lack of confidence in the reliability of the equipment and (self-perceived) lack of computer competence. Some teachers feel overwhelmed by the choices to be made. Repeated switching between modes (smart board versus presentation) tends to pose problems.

The younger cohort, being 'digital natives', quote different barriers. The courses they teach are standardised and allow for little variation or pedagogical innovation. Furthermore, the software employed in the classrooms is not compatible with teachers' PCs, so that documents developed with students cannot be changed afterwards. But also teacher beliefs play a role: one respondent even rejects Powerpoint which, he claims, robs students of the opportunity to focus and to discern what is really important.

Students' reactions to technology are positive without being enthusiastic; it is simply a standard they are accustomed to and expect. A case in point is the showing of audio/video clips in English classes: though students find it provides some variety and thus enhances classes, the activity has become too ordinary to be considered 'motivating'. Students' ideas of what constitutes efficient use of face-to-face time even means that some of them prefer outsourcing viewing activities to out-of-class environments. As far as skills are concerned, they find that internet resources offer plenty of opportunities for listening and viewing beyond the classroom; it is speaking they are keen on practising, preferably in face-to-face situations.

3.2 LLC

Over the past 15 years, a quantitative and qualitative monitoring survey has been distributed annually among LLC visitors. The questionnaire collates useful information about the visitors and their needs, as well as inviting feedback and proposals for improvement. This, combined with participant observation, in-depth interviews with learners in tandem programs, and individual language advising sessions, has made it possible to keep abreast of changes in users' behaviour. So, for instance, a

decrease in the use of paper-based dictionaries on site prompted an adjustment to the terms of use for this resource. Although nowadays the majority of students use online dictionaries when studying, they still need paper-based dictionaries for some of their exams. By allowing the loan of paper-based dictionaries, the LLC promotes the use of a resource which would otherwise remain largely ignored.

Despite the worry that the LLC would attract fewer visitors due to 'global' changes like the surge of popular apps like Duolingo (which make some of the language learning software pre-installed in the LLC look obsolete), the LLC is still very well frequented. The move to the new campus not only made it possible to create a state-of-the art language learning environment, but also to attract more visitors. Indeed, the decision to situate the new LLC as a clearly defined space (with its own staff and separate access) within the main library has proved to be beneficial in terms of increased visibility.

When asked why they visited the LLC if they just used resources available on the Internet, the majority of respondents to the annual monitoring 2016 (n= 100) gave the following answers: "I find it easier to concentrate"; "I can use accompanying materials"; "I use the time between two classes"; "I like the facilities and the atmosphere"; "I prefer to study among other language learners". Furthermore, feedback from learners in the tandem program points to the importance of finding supportive and competent staff when visiting the LLC.

3.3 Interaction between environments and teacher role

Students' muted reactions to in-class technology use are an example of how developments in informal learning can affect perceptions of activities in instructed environments. Arguably, the influence between formal and informal environment is unidirectional rather than reciprocal: with students' improved listening skills due to their frequent watching of English films and TV, they now perceive any scripted listening exercise, and often even authentic clips, as (too) facile. English teachers accordingly do not find it necessary to encourage informal learning, but focus their advice on tools and strategies that should help students succeed in the formal ESP context - which might include recommending a visit to the LLC.

This is different for languages other than English, where exposure to the TL does not happen as a matter of course in students' private spaces. To remedy that, one respondent, for instance, shows American hospital series in TL Russian during break time or uses the Russian Amazon interface to practise shopping vocabulary, thus managing to integrate activities that feature strongly in students' individual realities. Particularly concerning languages students are less proficient in, the teacher's role in drawing students' attention to the availability and validating the potential of informal learning is pivotal.

4. Conclusion

In order to thrive at a time in which language learning resources are available everywhere, institutional facilities like the LLC need to invest in creating added value for their services. This means not only having a well-stocked library and keeping abreast with technology, but also investing in an appealing infrastructure and promoting initiatives that act as a bridge between formal and informal, classroom and out-of-class, instructed and self-directed learning. Some of the measures taken in this sense at the LLC are the toolkits discussed above, implementing a language advisory service and providing plenty of guidance and support to tandem language learners.

The principle of added value also applies to classes. Neither students nor teachers appreciate technology for its own sake. The university's e-learning platform makes it easy to distribute digital content, and it has become increasingly important for teachers to decide which materials to use in face-to-face sessions, and which to allocate to environments beyond the classroom. The challenge today is for teachers to create a pedagogically sound blended environment that answers the needs of students, and to keep abreast of developments in students' private learning spaces that affect their expectations as well as their language skills.

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